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When the Clock Strikes Z

1

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: Breaking NewZ](#)

[Chapter 1: Family TieZ](#)

[Chapter 2: A World in RuinZ](#)

[Chapter 3: Faces Behind the NameZ](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short StorieZ](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

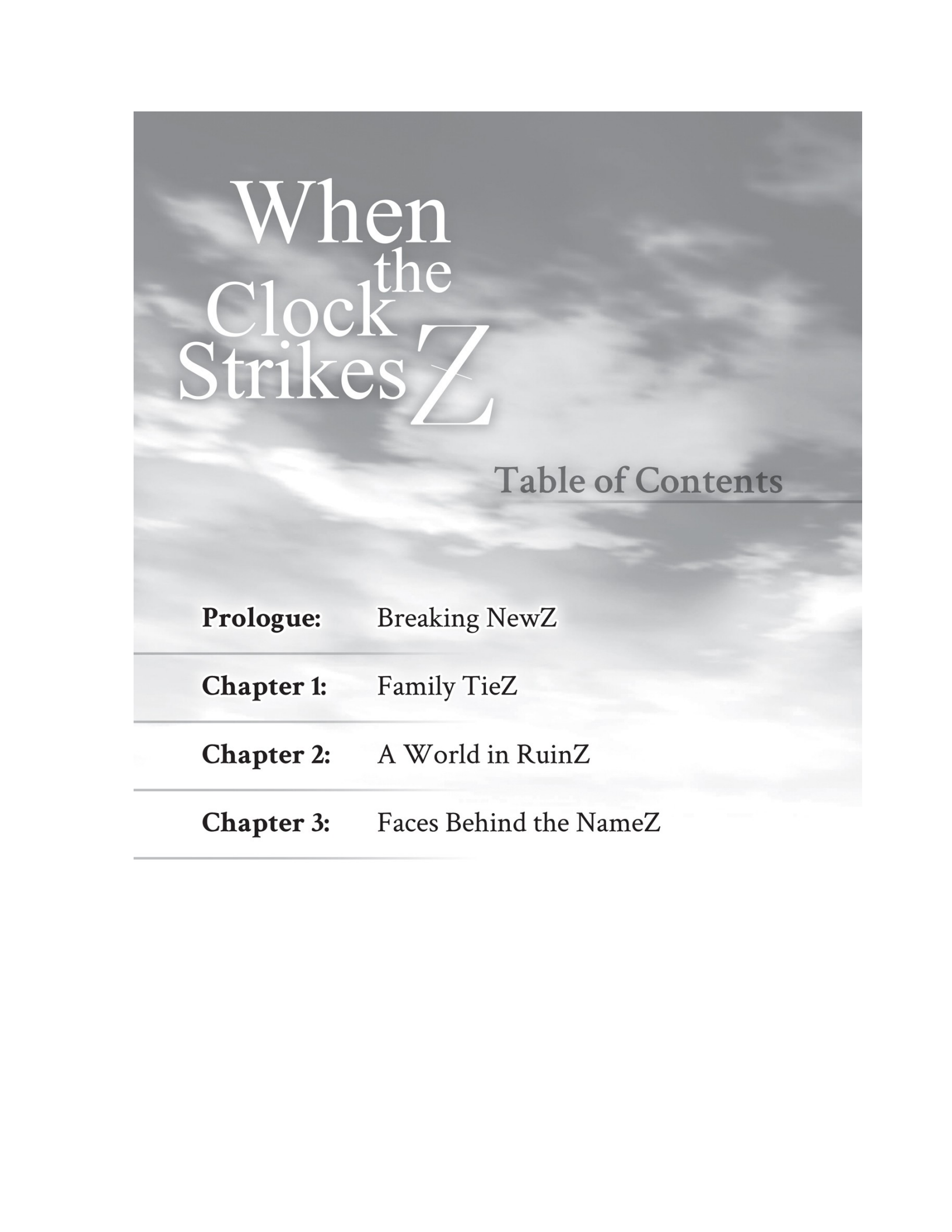
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Table of Contents

Prologue:	Breaking NewZ
------------------	---------------

Chapter 1:	Family TieZ
-------------------	-------------

Chapter 2:	A World in RuinZ
-------------------	------------------

Chapter 3:	Faces Behind the NameZ
-------------------	------------------------

Prologue: Breaking NewZ

Emotionally charged situations compromise one's ability to reason.

Under such circumstances, one might throw all caution to the wind and go with whatever feels right in the heat of the moment, only to lose everything after this fatal error in judgment.

This is just another retelling of a tale as old as time.

"Pull the trigger! Now!"

The screaming man carried a pistol of his own, but as was evident from the locked back slide, the magazine had already been fully emptied. Had there been any spare ammunition, he would've put it to good use by now.

"That thing's no longer human!"

He snaked his arm between two metal bars and pointed down the hall at a shadowy figure slowly creeping toward them.

Step by step, it inched closer and closer. Its movements were jerky and unnatural, as though it only reflexively stepped forward to keep itself from collapsing to the ground.

The unsettling aura radiating from the figure as it limped down the hallway couldn't be explained away by some sort of leg injury. No, there was something much more sinister at play.

"You're right... You're right, but I can't do it! I just can't!" sobbed a woman on the other side of the bars, shaking her head violently as she gripped her own pistol in both hands.

"Listen to me! It's not him! That *thing* isn't your boyfriend!" the man shouted while furiously rocking the iron bars.

Had it not been for this physical barrier between them, he could have been by her side. He could've ripped the gun right out of her hands and pumped the creature full of lead... but alas.

"He's dead! He's not with us anymore!"

"Yes he is! He's right here, and he's—"

"That is a monster! It's not the person you once knew!"

Death reduces a person to a lifeless corpse; it does not relegate them to the rank of the living dead. Qualia is an integral part of human consciousness, and the lumbering patchwork of flesh in front of them possessed no such quality. Though it had once been human, it was now a hollow, walking cadaver.

There was no question about this creature's condition—the left side of its chest, where a heart once beat to the rhythm of life, bore a massive, gaping hole encrusted with blood. A blow like that would've been enough to down the mightiest of men, and yet there it was, stumbling along one foot after the other in a poor imitation of its former self. The creature's very existence spat in the face of reason.

"Jodie, take the shot! For the love of God, just take the shot already!"

"I can't! I can't do this to him!" she cried, tossing away her pistol.

“Called it.”

A girl by the name of Otoha Judou nodded listlessly to herself. It was half past six in the evening, and her face was illuminated by the TV screen in an otherwise pitch-black living room.

On the screen, a girl was getting her head literally chewed off by her once-beloved boyfriend.



The gruesome display did not faze Otoha in the slightest; in fact, the bespectacled beauty seemed to relish every passing moment, not daring to blink.

Her zeal for the grotesque scene was almost unsettling, and this effect was only compounded by her unmoving posture, emotionless expression, and unblinking eyes. In this moment, she was practically a zombie herself.

Which is not to say Otoha wasn't cute. On the contrary, put her in a well-lit room, get her to smile, and you'd be amazed. Then again, it was easier said than done. Otoha cared little for her appearance. Her makeup game was virtually nonexistent, and she wore her hair in a simple bob as it was easy to maintain... and difficult to snatch. You get the idea.

Her evening was going splendidly. That is, until disaster found its way to her. Otoha squinted as light flooded the room.

"Shouldn't you be out?" she asked the offender.

"The lights stay on. I thought we went over this." Her older sister, Mizuki, crossed her arms and lightly tapped her foot. "You're doing this to spite me, aren't you?"

Being sisters, they greatly resembled one another but gave off very different impressions. Mizuki had well-kempt, silky-smooth locks and a masterfully applied face of makeup which highlighted her infinite range of expressions. In this regard, the two could not have been more different.

Additionally, Mizuki was a sophomore in college and a huge partygoer, so she would rarely return home before dinner—hence her little inquisition. If the inflections of her voice were anything to go by, Mizuki's plans for the evening had likely fizzled out at the very last moment.

"My bad," Otoha said, eyes glued to the screen.

In a miraculous turn of events, Jodie's gun landed right next to the bars. The man stuck his arm out, scrambling to pick it up as Jodie's reanimated boyfriend chewed away at her flesh. Jodie was done for, but it was a captivating scene nonetheless.

"Don't you 'my bad' me. I'm not looking for an apology; I'm looking for answers."

While it might have seemed strange for Mizuki to brush aside her little sister's rudeness, she had learned over the years that some aspects of Otoha's personality simply weren't going to change.

"I'm watching a movie."

"Yeah, and...?"

"That'd ruin the experience."

"The experience?" Mizuki looked at the TV, then back at Otoha. "You mean this low-rate garbage?"

"Ha-ha, very funny," Otoha said in a flat monotone. "Please, no more. My sides will split and all my organs will spill out."

Criticizing B movies for something that was, by definition, out of their control—such as low production values—wasn't exactly the hottest take.

Good-quality CGI, animatronics, special effects and makeup... all of these could certainly contribute to the realistic feel of a movie, but they were also very expensive and not within the limitations of a B movie budget. If anything, the fact that this team had chosen to create a zombie flick, which was incredibly cheap to make, showed that they were making the best of what they had. In Otoha's opinion, that was something to celebrate, not condemn.

"A freak *and* a comedian. You're a gift that just keeps on giving. A real riot." She walked over to Otoha, yinked the remote control, and changed the channel to a live news broadcast.

"Give it."

"Make me." She dangled the remote right in front of Otoha's deadpan face.

To Otoha, this wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It was actually perfectly in line with Mizuki's usual antics.

Having spent a good chunk of their lives in each other's company, the sisters could read one another with near-perfect accuracy. Their parents still couldn't get over how the two girls had ended up as polar opposites despite their shared upbringing. Neither of them ever said or did anything to stop it, however, as the girls' bickering was a constant that provided a sort of stability for their household.

Why even bother...? Otoha thought. She knew all too well that her pleas would fall on deaf ears, so she threw in the towel. Besides, she could stream the movie whenever she wanted. No harm, no foul.

In their extensive track record of petty disagreements, there was never a single instance where the older sister hadn't gotten her way. Otoha had enough self-awareness to know that this wasn't due to their age difference or anything like that; it was her eccentric nature that was the core of the problem.

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was definitely something wrong with her. Or maybe there was something fundamentally wrong with society at large. She hadn't yet reached a definitive conclusion on that one.

Either way, the fact of the matter was that she couldn't conform to societal norms as well as the average Joe. Others who experienced this same struggle tended to either lash out at society or quietly yearn for normalcy. Otoha, however, didn't fall into either category. She faintly felt that she didn't quite fit in, but it didn't go much deeper than that.

That was how it had always been. Unless some strange, inexplicable, life-changing event came crashing down on her, nothing was going to change. Otoha would never escape the purgatory of her eccentricity.

Or so she thought, but fate had different plans in store for her.

"Speaking of riots..."

The news was airing live footage of a riot happening overseas. A swarm of people was crowding outside a wide, blocky building. In front of the building was a blue sign bearing three white letters.

"That's the CDC's headquarters," mumbled Otoha.

"The what now?"

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A real zombie flick staple." Her gaze stayed fixed on the screen.

Otoha had seen many shots of the CDC's HQ in zombie movies, but in real life? That was a whole other story. Her inner zombie junkie wouldn't be caught dead missing out on this momentous occasion.

"A shame they couldn't save my sweet little sis from her own affliction. Poor thing didn't deserve to become a freak show."

"Pass me the remote. I'm recording this."

"Knock yourself out." With that, Mizuki carelessly tossed the remote her way.

Chapter 1: Family TieZ

Hiroaki Dewa, at your service.

My surname, by virtue of being fairly unique, tended to leave a lasting impression on people. They'd sometimes ask me to write it down, and bam! They'd get hit with the double whammy. Not that my name had ever benefited me in any tangible way.

Especially not on the battlefield.

There I was, all by my lonesome, weaving my way through decrepit skyscrapers, with nothing but my trusty SCAR-H by my side.

A giant crack ran through the ground, tearing into the earth like an open wound. Among the wreckage was a fully functioning crane; it seemed to beg for someone to take it away from the surrounding destruction before it was swallowed whole. The streets were cluttered with debris and upturned cars.

Mighty structures that had once kissed the heavens were now jagged heaps of iron and rubble; cars that had carried their drivers through thick and thin were hollowed out and devoid of life. Both were littered with the broken shards of their former utility, and it was a terribly lonely sight.

There was death, destruction, and chaos as far as the eye could see.

But amid all that, there was a glimmering beacon of life, shining like the sun.

Gunshots, explosions, and impassioned screams breathed life back into the desolate street and gave the upturned cars renewed purpose as makeshift cover. Attempting to count every individual bullet among the swarm would've been a fool's errand, but suffice to say, the vehicles served their purpose well.

So yeah, as I was saying... Names were meaningless out here.

Code names, on the other hand, were widespread. They called me "Hound Nine." If you tried using your real name in earnest for a day, you'd be lying in a ditch by nightfall.

I positioned myself against an armored vehicle and flicked my gun's safety switch to "off." I then pulled out a pocket mirror to scan the area.

"Huh?!"

The second I popped that sucker open, a red dot began slithering across my body.

A laser! This is bad; he's got his sights on me. Definitely got an itchy trigger finger.

I rolled out of sight to a nearby pile of rubble. Sparks flew off the body of the car, and then a gunshot rang out in the distance.

Judging by how long it took for the sound to catch up, the shot must've been taken from at least 400 meters away. A sniper, no doubt.

"Not half bad," I said.

Less than five minutes had passed since I set foot on the battlefield. All means of communication were currently blocked off by electromagnetic interference; GPS signals were no exception.

Despite all that, this deadeye had been able to spot me and single me out as an enemy on this chaotic battlefield as though it were child's play. His expertise and swift decision-making skills were unquestionable.

What he *did* lack was decent arms and a dash of luck.

Had it not been for the laser sights, he might've gotten the drop on me... If I were fresh fish, that is.

"But not good enough." I cracked a devious grin.

Predicaments like this were precisely why I had opted for the SCAR-H over the SCAR-L, despite the latter's lighter weight and superior magazine size. I had also coughed up a pretty penny to equip the little rascal with a state-of-the-art optical sight. Why, you might ask? Well, the SCAR-H was chambered in 7.62mm cartridges, which allowed it to achieve an effective firing range of over 700 meters with the standard barrel variation—more than enough to deal with a pesky sniper on my back.

To make it as a mercenary, you couldn't just be a jack-of-all-trades; you had to be a master of everything.

"See you in hell!"

I popped the selector into full auto, planted the gun firmly against a tiny gap in the rubble, held down the muzzle to minimize recoil, and sprayed like there was no tomorrow.

A truckload of empty shell casings later, I caught a glimpse of a blurry figure plummeting to its doom way out in the distance.

"Next time, try putting your back into it... and the same goes for you guys too!" I spun my trusty SCAR-H around and lobbed a 'nade from the MK 13 EGLM I had mounted under the barrel.

They'd thought it was safe to peek out because I had no means of retaliating, but they had another thing coming.

The 40mm grenade emerged with a loud *thwump*, a sound comically out of place among all the sharp cracks of assault rifles. Slowly but surely, it soared over to the enemies' hiding spot.

"Update your algorithms and try again, bozos!"

"Oh, God!"

After gracing me with an eerily realistic scream, they scrambled back behind cover without realizing what a futile move it was. Grenade launchers did not require direct line of sight, so all these guys could do was blankly stare at the 'nade as it flew over their cover and detonated right in the middle of it.

"Nothing personal," I said, grinning even wider as the enemy soldiers flailed through the air.

It wasn't really satisfying to trash-talk NPSs (Non-Player Soldiers), although it could be done for the sake of immersion. NPSs turned into a

series of ones and zeroes upon death, so it was easy to tell them apart from regular players.

“Man, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” I muttered, switching out the empty magazine. “You’re *all* NPSs? That must mean that the sniper from earlier was one too.”

At that moment, a music track began to play, signaling the end of the simulation.

“Wait, that’s it?! I just got on a few minutes ago, what gives?!”

No one was around to answer my complaints.

The battle-ravaged city instantly fell away, seamlessly transitioning into a drab control room. Besides the fifty-something foldable chairs, the room was completely barren. The striking emptiness gave it an otherworldly vibe. It was clean, sure, but that sterility made it all the more stifling. I personally found it a little charming, though.

A robotic voice resonated throughout the room. “The combat simulation has been completed. Here are the results.”

The massive screen mounted on the wall displayed various notable stats: damage taken, accuracy, ammo expenditure, play time, and the total score, which was calculated by throwing together the four initial variables.

Under normal circumstances, one’s total score would be posted on a leaderboard and compared to that of other competing players.

[1st place: “Hound Nine”]

[2nd place:]

[3rd place:]

But these were no normal circumstances.

“Is the game dying or what? Sure feels like it these days,” I asked the inconspicuous character idling by the wall.

“You’ve been the only active player these last five days, Hound Nine,” she replied. This was Raven, an AI assistant whose appearance was sickeningly sweet; she had beautiful blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and glistening, ocean-blue eyes.

Raven was a key NPC in the VRFPS game *Field Battle*. She handled ammo refills, unit arrangements, bounty notices, tips and tricks, and much more. She did it all, and she did it well.

The express purpose of her design was to outfit *Field Battle* with its very own original mascot character. She might not have been the most unique character out there, but she did manage to garner a fair bit of attention. In fact, I was pretty sure that a life-size figure of her was in the works, according to a fairly recent announcement made by—whoops, getting a little too off-track here.

“You’re yanking my chain. You gotta be.”

“Look at it this way: you’re officially this week’s top player!” she said with a great big smile. “Allow me to congratulate you.”

"Aw, shucks. I couldn't have done it without you. Wait a sec, doesn't that mean this game is officially dead?!"

For a brief period of time, *Field Battle* had been all the rage. Player counts wouldn't dip below 100,000 even outside peak hours... yet here I was, all alone. Granted, the game had been leached of players by competing franchises for a while now, and the lackluster patches certainly hadn't helped. Still, I marveled at how the mighty had fallen.

"It's not just *Field Battle* either; the entire FPS genre is on its last legs." I swiped the air, bringing up a bunch of windows. *Paramilitary Company, Strait Jacket, Crack Hound, The Juggle, Seraphim Zone...* Everything from futuristic FPS games to those with a World War II theme was effectively dead. There had been an obvious downward trend in user bases across the board.

I tried looking through my friends list. Wouldn't you know it, none of them had been online in the past five days. To be fair, my total number of friends was just above the double-digit mark, but they were all hardened VR gamers who would easily sacrifice basic necessities such as eating or going to the bathroom just to squeeze a little more game time into their day. I didn't believe for a second that these same people had been able to resist indulging in their favorite pastime for days.

"How? I mean, it wasn't bleeding users *that* fast."

"Enough to give the game developers a good scare, that's for sure."

I'm sure they appreciate you telling me this, I thought.

"Still, a game as big as *Field Battle* doesn't just die out like that."

"Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Who knows?"

"It's the devs' fault, isn't it? It has to be."

In that case, wouldn't the users just migrate to a different FPS with better devs?

"It's past peak hours and all, but it's never been *this* empty."

"Who knows," Raven repeated.

Good thing Raven's AI just happens to deteriorate when I need answers.

"Well, I *am* a lone wolf at heart. Getting close to other people would just make me weak."

Brooding aside, I would've gladly taken a human player of any skill level over some bot. There was a gap that computers just couldn't fill.

Raven just smiled and nodded.

So, what now?

I shrugged in an overly exaggerated, dare I say theatrical manner, when suddenly...

"Not you again!"

My stomach had just made itself known with a bout of intense growling, totally destroying the mood.

Guess I can't fault you for doing what you were made to do, little buddy. Shame noise cancelers don't work on these kinds of sounds, though.

"I'm off."

"As you wish." Raven bowed. "Best of luck, Hiroaki."

"You too... Wait, what did you just—"

Before I could get an answer, my screen went black.

"What was that all about?"

Did she just mix up her lines?

"Best of luck" was the signature voice line used when a player was dropped onto the battlefield directly from the control room. It makes sense in the given context but not so much outside of it, especially not for logging out.

She'd also addressed me by my real name, unless I just misheard her. Players were required to provide their first and last names, addresses, credit card information, and phone numbers to complete the sign-up process—in case of microtransactions, of course—so the devs obviously had my name stored away somewhere. But the fact that Raven, an NPC, had said it out loud could only mean one thing...

My stomach resumed its protests, derailing my train of thought.

"Alright, alright, I get the memo."

I'll just press Raven about it the next time I hop on. Not like it's a matter of life and death or anything.

"I really need to grab a bite to eat," I muttered as I pulled off my VR headset.

I was immediately greeted by none other than my greatest enemy: reality.

There I was, in my six-mat room. Aside from the VR platform right in the middle of the room, there was little worth noting... just some cheapo furniture and *lots* of garbage.

"I could've sworn I had some snacks left around here somewhere." I set my gun controller down on the bed. It was a perfect replica of the SCAR-H, crafted with meticulous attention to detail so it looked and felt just like the real thing. After that, I popped off my VR shoes and stepped off the platform.

My hand instinctively reached inside the bag of chips on the table... but, much to my displeasure, it was empty.

"I really should've gotten some shut-eye."

Yes, who would've thought that pulling an all-nighter might have consequences later down the line?

What made matters worse was how physically draining these types of VR games were. Every single movement required manual input, and the heavy, custom-made controller didn't help. It was only natural to get peckish after a long sesh.

That being said...

"That slop they've been trying to pass off as food lately isn't fit for human consumption."

To tell you the truth, I hadn't had a decent meal in close to a week now, and my snack stock was running low.

"I still get nightmares when I think back to yesterday or the day before."

My family's mistreatment of me, the oldest child, wasn't anything new. It had all started when I dropped out of high school halfway through my first year. For brevity's sake, let's just say it wasn't for me.

Anyway, I had a lot of free time on my hands, so to keep myself busy I set out to dominate the *Field Battle* leaderboards for an entire year straight. Such a feat was bound to make me famous, and then I'd ride that hype train to my career debut as a pro gamer. Graduating high school, getting into a decent college, job hunting... I'd get to breeze past all that boring stuff. The freelance life came with the added perks of working from home and, better yet, no office politics.

It was just perfect... Except for the fact that my family wasn't exactly on board with the idea. They pretended to show their poor son love and support at first, but when they realized I was dead serious, their true colors started to show. It wasn't anything *too* egregious, initially, but it only got worse by the day until it officially went from casual neglect to targeted harassment a little while back.

I only ever left the sanctity of my room to dash to the bathroom or sneak in a midnight shower. The shower and the toilet were both on the second floor, so fortunately, I hadn't had to go down to the first floor in over a month. I should mention, though, that the kitchen was down there.

My family members placed my meal portions at my doorstep, and it was all just peachy until two days ago, when my lunch came in spoiled.

While I would have been willing to turn a blind eye if the rice had only been a little bit past its expiration date, something about the putrid stench had told me that wasn't the case. Just to be sure, I had dipped my finger in—the grains stuck to it like glue.

I did appreciate that they'd used their finest china. A wonderfully passive-aggressive gesture.

Did they purposefully leave out a bunch of rice and let it collect as much moisture as possible? Or did they boil it and then let it sit for days on end? Either way, admirable dedication on their part.

If I so chose, I could have gone down there and pitched a fit, but they'd put in so much effort just to spite me that I would've almost felt bad for doing it. Instead, I'd dumped it in a trash bag and continued to pretend it didn't exist. I wondered if this was their idea of attrition warfare.

"What's the big deal, anyway? I'm just taking a short break from it all."

I had my whole life ahead of me, so what did it matter if I took a year or two to do some much-needed self-discovery?

On the flip side, you have those dreaded normies who just get to do whatever they want. They sleep or play mobile games in class, or they skip class altogether to do it whenever and wherever: the bathroom, the infirmary, the gym storage room, you name it. Only a fraction of these people actually take their schoolwork seriously.

I, on the other hand, never did any of those things. Yet just because I happen to be an FPS junkie, I'm somehow worth less than them in the eyes of society? Unlike those guys, I've got life goals that'll rake in the cash. On top of all that, VRFPS experience basically doubles as army service, so I'm also doing this for the betterment of my country.

Okay, I'm getting a little too heated; I should drop it.

"Who do they think they are, anyway, treating me like complete garbage?!"

Being hangry is no joke.

In a fit of rage, I picked up a plastic bottle and flung it as hard as I could at my school uniform, which had been hanging on the wall ever since I dropped out.

A cloud of dust burst out from the impact, and I was seized by a violent coughing fit. I quickly reached over and popped the window wide open to get some fresh air.

"God dammit!"

If life were a game, the unbalanced system would make it totally unplayable.

People's general attitudes toward gamers like myself were invariably rooted in disdain. Neither my fellow classmates nor my family were exceptions; they all thought I was sick in the head, and they felt justified enough in this belief to say so out loud.

"How dare they lump me in with those filthy mobile-game casuals," I grumbled, turning to face the VR platform.

No matter how "fake" virtual reality was, it didn't change the fact that every single in-game motion had to be input by the user with no outside assistance.

The replica SCAR-H came with counterweights, which accurately simulated the recoil you'd get from the real thing. Besides the fact that everything was virtual, there was no real difference between *Field Battle* and an actual warzone.

"Look at this perfectly chiseled body. You might not like it, but this is what peak performance looks like."

The replica SCAR-H alone weighed over five kilograms. If you tacked on the weight of all the backup magazines and my sidearm of choice—the HK VP9—I was basically getting a full-body workout every time I stepped on the platform.

"Unlike those filthy overweight NEETs who gorge on chips and pizza all day, us VR gamers are a force to be reckoned with!"

Let's just, uh, ignore the fact that I've basically been surviving on nothing but chips these past few days.

"Enough's enough. It's about time I gave them a piece of my mind. We could've settled this like adults, but nooo, they just had to pull the attrition card, didn't they?"

I looked at the clock. It was 7:00 a.m. Breakfast time.

My parents, and even my little brother, were uptight folks, to say the least. You'd think they were NPCs running on a script with how anal they were about having breakfast at exactly seven o'clock sharp.

Around the same time, Mom brings up my serving of food, as though daring me to confront her.

How 'bout this time I throw open the door and yell a little to scare her? You serve a man food unfit for dogs, and you deserve whatever comes your way. What more can I say?

Now that I was all fired up, I put my ear against the door and listened carefully. I could hear footsteps coming up the stairs.

There we go. All according to plan.

She was getting closer and closer. Soon I could pick out the distinct sound of clinking silverware. There was no doubt about it—Mom was bringing me breakfast.

Wait for it... Wait for it... Now!

"If you think I'll stand for this one more time, you've got another thing coming!" I shouted, shoving the door open.

Now that I think about it, it's been about a month since I've interacted with my mother. But hey, that's the cost of working toward my dream.

"I'll have you know that... that... Huh?"

My tirade died in my throat. There was something slightly—scratch that, *noticeably* off about her.

"Um, are you feeling alright?" I blurted.

Mom always had a pallid complexion, but her skin had never been quite this pale; it looked almost translucent. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. The area around her left eye was also horrifically swollen. I couldn't tell if it was pus or blood, but something was oozing out from the wound and onto her collar and apron. It must've been going on a while, because the stain was both big and putrid.

All that I could still chalk up to coincidence. But it didn't end there.

I stared at her veiny neck. As much as I would've liked to pretend I didn't see it, her skin had begun peeling off at the throat, revealing a mess of bloodied tissue underneath.

This can't be... There's no way.

"That Halloween costume must've taken you ages."

"Grrrghh..."

Mom let out a growl and began approaching me with the tray.

"Wow, uh, you've even got the whole zombie act down pat!"

"GraAAaAgh!"

"Okay, you can stop now. No, seriously, please stop!" I cried, backing away from her.

She's not stopping. Somebody help me! This can't be happening. This can't be happening. My dear, sweet mother just wants to hand me the tray in person! Yes that's it. That's gotta be it. Oh, who am I kidding?! She's... She's...!

"A-Are you mad at me?"

Bro, do you hear yourself right now?!

"GraAaAgh!"

"I promise I'll be a good boy. I'll, um, start going to school again! W-Will that make you happy?"

"GraAaAgh!"

"I'll lay off the games, I swear! Please, for the love of God, go back to being my mother!"

My pleas fell on deaf ears. She just kept on creeping closer, making those awful, guttural screams. Within moments, I had my back pressed against the wall.

"Back off or you'll be sorry!" I screamed, clutching my gun controller.

There's no way this is real. I must still be in the game.

In the virtual world, a single pull of the trigger would've been enough to put an end to this torment. But this wasn't the virtual world, nor did I have a real gun by my side. As well-made as the replica was, it couldn't shoot bullets.

I held back the tears as best as I could and menacingly held up the SCAR-H. She didn't even flinch. Those milky eyes of hers weren't even looking at me; they were looking *through* me.

"Don't you dare come any closer!"

Still, my pitiful attempts at intimidation went nowhere.

I couldn't force myself to pistol-whip my own mother with a five-kilogram weight, so I just aimlessly swung it around in the air, hoping she'd go away.

She didn't. In fact, she lunged straight at me.

I blacked out for a second, and next thing I knew, my SCAR-H had made solid contact with her skull, producing a wet *thump*. The tray fell out of her hands, its spoiled contents scattering all over the floor.

"I didn't mean to, I swear...! Huh?"

She was still standing, albeit hunched over with her neck bent unnaturally to one side. The impact had left most of her body momentarily frozen, save for her arms, which appeared capable of operating on their own. With inhuman strength, they tried to rip the gun controller out of my hands.

"Oh no you don't!" I said as I managed to pry it away from her.

Had I been holding the gun properly, my index finger would've probably gotten crushed against the trigger guard. The force was just that intense.

"GraAagh!"

I couldn't utter another word. True fear whisked away one's voice; there was no screaming, only deafening silence.

Jaw unhinged, she resumed moving toward me. Half her teeth were missing, while the other half were in the process of rotting away, which added an extra layer of believability to the whole thing.

I'm gonna get eaten alive, I'm gonna get eaten alive!

My fight-or-flight response kicked in, telling me to make a break for it. The problem was that I had no real escape route. Mom was currently blocking the exit, and I didn't have it in me to jump out of a second-story window. We had spikes nailed to the top of the fence as a measure against trespassing. If I were to fumble my fall, there was a very real chance I'd impale myself by accident.

This must all be one big nightmare. There's no other feasible explanation. But wait, what if I really am still in the virtual world? Like, I got sucked into some new zombie FPS that's all the rage. I've just got to take off my headset and everything will go back to normal.

"GraAaAagh!"

"Get away from me!"

I hastily emptied out my tactical pouch, where I had stored away my HK VP9 and any spare magazines, and then I chucked them at her one by one. Once those ran out, I resorted to throwing books, plastic bottles, and even heftier pieces of trash. That was the best I could do, given the circumstances.

"Get away, get away, get away!"

One of the plastic bottles I threw still had some liquid inside, and it got all over my room. It was going to stain if I didn't clean it up, but I didn't exactly have the time or patience to be doing that right now.

I'm out of ammo!

Game, set, match... or so I thought.

"Sweet Jesus!"

I caught sight of sparks flying out of the wall socket and leapt away immediately. A second later, my mother's body began violently convulsing.

"No way," I murmured.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed she was standing on top of a power strip drenched in a puddle of water. She was being electrocuted.

"GraAA—grggh—aAar—rgh!" The current was so strong, she couldn't even keep a proper roar going for more than a moment.

Her being locked in place had nothing to do with pain; the electrical current passing through her body was zapping her nervous system and assaulting her with muscle spasms, preventing her from moving voluntarily.

A few moments later, the power strip burst into flames.

This appeared to be the final nail in the coffin, as she fell flat on her face right then and there, knocking the nearby bookshelf off balance in the process. Well, it had been a bookshelf two years ago, anyway. Since then, it had become my dumping ground for all sorts of boxes.

"Mom?"

She was pelted by all the boxes as they slid from the shelves until the whole piece of furniture came down on her full force.

"...Mom?"

There was an audible splatter, followed by silence.

"Mom, a-are you okay?"

A well-timed pool of thick, rancid blood started seeping out from underneath the bookshelf. It really drove the point home.

She's dead. There's no question about it. Her head got cracked wide open. There's no way in hell she's recovering from that. Still, it feels wrong to call her "dead" in the first place. Part of me feels like...

"You were never even alive to begin with."

Any normal, fully functioning human being would've paid the doctor a visit by now, or at least have refrained from serving their own child spoiled food. Zombies could groan and move about, but their actions completely lacked the drive and vitality possessed by the living.

"This is all just a bad fever dream, right?"

There was no reply.



"If anyone's out there, send help! Please, I'm begging you..."

After God knows how long, I finally returned to my senses.

I decided to go downstairs in search of help.

While I might've stopped myself from retreating into the deepest recesses of my mind, I wasn't exactly stable. From an outsider's perspective, I was nothing more than some antisocial shut-in who'd lashed out at his very own mother for undeniably petty reasons. No one was going to bring her back to life, so calling for help would only accomplish one thing: getting me thrown in jail for matricide. Needless to say, I wasn't thinking straight.

If I *had* been in control of my mental faculties, I would've noticed one teeny, tiny discrepancy: how did Mom's condition go unnoticed? Pretty funny now that I think about it, in a dark, twisted kind of way.

"Dad, is that you?"

As I mentioned earlier, my family was an uptight bunch. Before leaving for work, Dad would always take the time to meticulously shine his shoes. Maybe if the cheapskate bought a new pair instead of holding onto the worn-out ones, he wouldn't have to waste his time doing that.

And wouldn't you know it—there he was, shining his shoes like any other morning...

"Grarrrrgh."

...except for the fact that he was making those same weird growling noises as my mom.

"You've *got* to be kidding me."

Luckily, he didn't notice me. I snuck past him and into the living room, where my dear little brother, Yoshiaki, was watching TV.

"What on earth are you doing?"

No response. He just kept giggling and giggling at, presumably, some comedy show.

"Mom and Dad are acting all weird, and you're just sitting there on your ass watching... TV...?" My voice trailed off as the realization hit me.

There was nothing on. The screen was pitch-black, save for a tiny “no signal” message tucked away in the corner.

“In that case...” I gathered the courage to sneak up behind him.

I peeked over his shoulder and noticed that his hands were caked with some sort of fleshy chunks. It took me a good few seconds of mental processing to realize that they were leftovers. As I tried wrapping my head around it all, I noticed our Shiba Inu’s collar resting at his feet.

“This has got to be some sort of sick joke...”

That being said, this kind of thing was to be expected. With both parents being afflicted, it only made sense that their middle-school-aged child had fallen victim as well.

I decided to leave him be and made my way to the kitchen. I intended to leave the house through the back door. I couldn’t stomach this place for even a second longer. I didn’t know where to go, but I needed it to be anywhere but here.

“Where’s that foul stench coming from?” I wondered aloud as my nostrils were assaulted by a horrific smell. The power of it made me reflexively squeeze my eyes shut.

When I opened them again, I saw our desecrated kitchen. Blood, chunks of flesh, and guts were spilled everywhere; not a single inch of the tile had been fortunate enough to escape the mayhem. The fetid odor wafting out of the open fridge was a cut above all of that. There wasn’t a single item inside that hadn’t spoiled to some degree.

“Here goes nothing.” I pinched my nose shut, squinted, and scanned the room for any items of interest.

I noticed a kitchen knife, so I went and picked it up. Loose pieces of flesh fell to the floor with a *smack*. What was supposedly a stainless steel knife was now peppered with spots of rust. It must’ve been left out unwashed for more than a day. Three days? Five, maybe? I couldn’t say for sure.

“I think I’m about to hurl...” Before I had a chance to, I heard someone behind me.

“GraAaagh!”

Shit! They found me!

I turned around and saw my father and brother heading into the kitchen, arms outstretched.

Maybe they just want to give me a nice big hug for finally stepping out of my room? Oh, how I wish that were the case.

“Stay back or else!” I pointed the knife in their direction, but they kept on coming.

Just like my mother, they either didn’t feel pain or were incapable of processing language, or both. Either way, they were a force to be reckoned with, if not for...

“Grrrgh... Grr.”

“Grgh, grgh, grgh.”

...their limited intellectual capabilities.

While trying to barge into the kitchen at the same time, they both got stuck in the doorway. It wasn't about who would get dibs on some fresh human meat—they were just that oblivious to their surroundings, kind of like a fly repeatedly bashing into a window to make its way outside.

"Haha... Hahaha! Just look at you; you're pathetic! Pathetically *stupid* that is!" I couldn't help but laugh at the unexpected turn of events.

This isn't real, this can't be real, tell me it ain't real, why won't anyone tell me it ain't real?

"You guys are killing me! Ahaha...haha... Wait, what the...?"

They started making an awful lot of noise, so I looked up and saw them trying to break down the walls by punching them repeatedly. Even after breaking every bone in both of their arms, they persisted, their legs in constant motion so as not to miss the opportunity to squeeze through.

Whatever those things are, they're not human. No sane human would ever seriously consider destroying their body to accomplish a task as meaningless as getting through a doorway. At least, not as far as I'm concerned.

"I can't... This is too much."

I step out of my room one day, and it turns out my whole family has been zombified. Sounds like some scrapped B movie premise.

"To hell with all of you!" I cried.

I turned back one last time, and after taking a good, hard look at what I once considered family, I left through the back door and into the outside world.



Getting arrested was now the least of my worries.

I decided to head to the nearest police station.

If memory serves, it should be just three minutes away on foot. I'd dial 110, but it'd take too long and time is of the essence.

"That's... odd." As I trekked across the neighborhood, I noticed a striking lack of people. There wasn't a single soul in sight.

Granted, it's still pretty early... Wait, no, that's the whole problem! It's rush hour right now, and there's nobody out! Nada! Zilch! That can only mean one thing...

"Keep it together, man." I nipped my thoughts in the bud and kept on running. I couldn't bear to lose all hope just yet.

Soon, I reached the local police station.

"There's been an accident. I need help, pronto!" I stood at the door and cried out for help... but nobody answered.

They're probably just out patrolling the streets. Why they thought that was a good idea when somebody could need their help at any time is beyond me, though.

From what I understand, 24/7 convenience stores are the ideal place to hide from any shady individuals... But in this case, beggars can't be choosers.

"It should be safe here," I told myself as I locked the door.

Not even a full second later, I heard a distant *thwump*.

"What if there's someone sleeping in there?" I wondered aloud, looking toward the other door where the sound had come from.

I'd heard once that police stations had their own dedicated nap rooms where they'd take turns recharging their batteries.

I circled around the counter and approached the door. This area was most likely off-limits to civilians, but I honestly couldn't have cared less.

Do what you want with me; I just want some peace of mind.

Unfortunately, fate had something else in store for me.

"Ugh, there's that nasty stench again." I had opened the door just a crack, only to be greeted by a familiar foul odor.

I should've gunned it right then and there. Instead—whether I was just desensitized or totally off my rocker—I decided to do the exact opposite and step inside.

A uniformed police officer was on his knees, zealously chowing down on something in his hands.

Nom. Nom. Nom. Nom.

He munched and crunched away without a care in the world.

Beside him lay a girl's corpse, clad in my former high school's standard uniform. You heard me right—a corpse, without a shadow of a doubt. The massive, gaping hole in her stomach was all the proof I needed. Judging by the absence of any oozing blood, it was safe to assume that her heart had long ceased functioning.

Half of the internal organs rested in the officer's grubby little hands, while the other half was, presumably, getting all warm and cozy inside his belly.

That could've been me.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed another two bodies sprawled across the floor. One of them had an excavated stomach, just like the girl, and the other was missing a good chunk of its neck. Common sense would dictate that they were dead, and it would've been right on the money in a normal world, but their jaws were quivering, indicating life.

"Th-They're..."

Alive. All of them! Well, actually, they're dead, but they're also not? Man, this is way too confusing.

Anyway, I think it's fairly safe to assume that these kids sought out the policeman, hoping he'd make the big bad monsters go away, only to find out that he'd been one all along.

This line of reasoning made me realize something else.

Wait, I've been doing the very same thing. Doesn't that mean if I don't change my course of action, my bowels or my neck are also gonna become dinner, and then I'll become a mindless, flesh-eating zombie just like them?!

I've gotta get out of here, stat.

I carefully crept back to the door.

So long as the officer doesn't take notice, I should be in the clear. The zombie fledglings are too busy violently convulsing to pose any tangible threat. Don't you dare turn around. Yep, that's what I thought. Good boy.

One imaginary exchange later, I was scarcely a meter away from the door.

*Free at la—
"Eek!"*

I was so sure I was in the clear, up until the *Field Battle* opening theme started playing out of nowhere, causing me to shriek.

I forgot to turn off my alarm!

My buddies and I had a set time for when we'd get together and chill in the virtual realm. I had the alarm set as a reminder... and now it was about to signal my time of death. I would've tried to turn it off, but it was already too late.

"Grrrgh?" The police officer lifted his head and slowly turned around.
Easy does it.

I tried calmly backing up, only to immediately trip on a folded steel chair.

Oh, gimme a break.

I tried getting back on my feet, but to no avail. My body wouldn't—no, *couldn't* move.

Dammit, dammit, DAMMIT!

"S-Stay back! Stay back, I said!"

He kept getting closer and closer until I could feel the warmth of his rotten breath as his face approached mine.

"Grargh..."

Is this game over? Am I done for? It can't end like this!

"GraaAar—hrk!" Next thing I knew, the incessant growling had stopped.

"Hm?" I pried my eyes open and saw that the zombie's head had fused with the blade of a shovel. Well, not exactly "fused"... More like the thing was sticking out of its skull.

This was what happened to one's mind under copious amounts of stress.

Once I started coming back to my senses, I assessed the situation a little more objectively. The shovel's blade had entered the zombie's skull through its left temple and pierced it about halfway through before losing momentum and grinding to a halt.

"Eep!"

Just as I finished my evaluation, it slipped out of the skull, splattering blood all over the place. The shovel-wielding renegade must have pulled it out.

Having suffered a fatal blow to the head, the zombie fell to the ground, revealing the person behind the act.

"Is that... a girl?"

It was indeed. She appeared to be in her teens, roughly my age.

Her hair was cut in a short... whatchamacallit... bob, I think? Anywho, she had something of an androgynous vibe, but not the outdoorsy kind. Well, not with those red plastic frames resting on her nose, in any case.

The pink barrette was kinda cute... until I realized it was weeping big black tears, and that it had one eye and a chunk of its cranium missing. It wasn't an adorable little piggie like I'd initially thought; it actually resembled a cartoonish zombie.

Questionable taste, but hey, whatever floats your boat.

The well-rounded facial features, the tapering jawline, the doe-eyed expression... This girl was plenty cute.

She perched the shovel atop her shoulder and then made a masterful horizontal swipe, slicing the officer-zombie's head clean off.

His dome-piece bounced off the wall and landed by my feet, and I stared down at the gray matter peeking through loose bits of cranium. I'd thought I had gotten desensitized to these kinds of horrific displays by now, but the sight was so disturbing I couldn't even muster the will to scream.

The girl walked right up to the remaining fledglings and chopped off every single one of their heads with mechanical precision, completely unfazed. It was oddly satisfying seeing fountains of blood going off to an almost rhythmic beat of tearing flesh in the background.

"Atta girl!"

Glad I never got the chance to turn off the music; makes this whole thing feel like a crazy slasher film.

Once she was finished, she turned back and started heading in my direction. As she approached, she brought the shovel overhead in one fluid motion.

Is she thinking what I think she's thinking?

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Chill, chill!"

The girl froze mid-swing. I could feel the blade tickling my hair.

Whew, way too close for comfort. Who is this girl anyway? And why's she so... businesslike? It's almost as if she's been doing this for a living. Doing what, exactly? That I'm not so sure about.

"Are you some unique type of zombie?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Uh, 'type'?"

What an odd way to classify other humans... or what's left of them anyway.



"Not that there haven't been instances of talking zombies in the past, but their speech patterns were distinctly different from yours in that..." She lowered the shovel, rested her hand against her cheek and trailed off into an incoherent monologue like nothing had happened.

And here I was thinking that the zombies were bad, but this girl takes the cake.

"So that's that," she concluded. "I think I'll bash your head in just to be safe. No reason not to."

"I'm human! What more do you want?!" I cried, trying to appeal to her humanity.

She stopped in her tracks.

"...Fine." After an intense bout of staring, she *begrudgingly* chose to spare my life.

"Are you okay?" she added offhandedly.

Call me unreasonable, but something about her deadpan delivery felt lacking in sincerity.

"Am I okay? You almost killed me back there! And put that thing down, will ya!"

She reluctantly lowered her shovel after some deliberation.

"I didn't know there were other survivors."

What a half-baked attempt at an excuse. But if what she's saying is true, then that means...

"So that's where the obnoxious tune was coming from." She pointed toward my pocket.

"Oh, umm, sorry; I'll shut it off right away." I took out my phone and turned off the power. Leaving it on would've put me at risk of receiving unwanted phone calls and messages. At least alarms were somewhat predictable; calls and texts could come at any time.

"Hold this." She handed me the bloodstained shovel, which my hands reflexively took from her. Considering how heavy it was, I was surprised she'd been able to wield it with ease, but it didn't seem that was much of an issue for her.

I didn't quite get why she'd given me the shovel, but I had a feeling she was up to no good. I watched closely as she took the gun out of the officer's holster.

"What're you doing? You'll get us both in trouble."

"How so?"

"Japan's gun control law prohibits civilians from carrying guns. We'll get arrested on the spot!"

"By who?"

"What do you mean *by who*? The police, ob...viously..." It slowly dawned on me that this cop's zombie status had some pretty far-reaching implications.

"Think this thing's loaded?" she asked, staring down the barrel. I tossed away the shovel and immediately pried it from her hands.

"Do you have a death wish or something?!"

"Hey, I called dibs on that."

"Now's not the time for games! You could've gotten yourself killed!"

"My finger was off the trigger."

"There's so much wrong with that statement that I'll pretend I didn't hear it. Here's how you check if this particular piece is loaded or not." I looked over the gun.

Let's see here...

It was a S&W M360J. The police models were marked "SAKURA M360J." This gun was a variant of the Model 36—also known as the "Chief's Special"—with a lanyard ring attached for Japanese law enforcement.

Two-inch snub-nosed barrel, five-round cylinder... About what you'd expect from your typical police revolver.

I had practiced using a Chief's Special before in a police-themed FPS game I'd played back in the day, so I was probably good to go. This one was a different model, but in all actuality there was very little variation between them, seeing as they were made by the same manufacturer. That being said, this would be my first time handling the real thing, so I decided to put on an air of confidence so this girl wouldn't question my authority.

"Watch and learn, newbie. First, you push down the cylinder release." I held down the latch and gently flicked my wrist to the side. The cylinder came out with no issue.

"I see." The girl was in awe. While she might've had a massive leg up on me in terms of zombie knowledge, I too had a domain of my own. "So, is it loaded?"

"Right. Lemme check real quick... Uh, yep, fully loaded." It was clear from the condition of the cases that they had yet to be fired. Poor cop must've been caught off guard.

"Good." She plucked the gun right out of my hands without even giving me time to react.

My mind ran amok with all sorts of paranoid delusions, but the only shot that fired next came from her lips.

"Shoes," she barked, pointing at my feet.

"What about them?"

"You're missing 'em."

"Hah! You think I'd fall for tha—"

I looked down and realized that I was, in fact, shoeless.

Wow, I was panicking so hard back home that I totally forgot to put my shoes on. Then again, who wouldn't have freaked out that badly if they were in my shoes... or lack thereof. My whole family got turned into zombies, then took turns trying to feast on my flesh. Our pet dog was eaten alive by my little brother. Yeah, I think I've got the right.

To be fair, we never really got along anyway, so I can't say I feel too distraught over this. Then again, that could just be the desensitization talking.

"Just nick a pair. They're basically ours now." With that, she started digging through the police lockers like it was no big deal.

I swear to God, she's doing that thing RPG players do where they enter some random NPC's home and immediately go around furiously mashing the action button on anything even remotely resembling an interactive object, stealing what little food the poor NPC has to use as a healing item for their own selfish purposes.

"It's survival one-oh-one. Get with the times."

"You know what, I will."

If that's the only alternative to staying barefoot like a good boy, I'll gladly take it.

I began rooting through the lockers myself. Upon noticing this, my companion ditched my newly established turf and began rummaging through some drawers.

"Grab anything useful," she said flatly. "Spare ammo, food, you know the drill."

"Spare ammo? As if you'll find any."

"No kidding?"

"You're messing with me, right?"

I was hoping this was a really bad joke. A police officer, of all people, would never leave ammo out in the open.

"That's how it works in the movies."

"Uh, that's because those movies were made by Americans."

After a few quippy back-and-forths, I finally stumbled across a pair of perfectly fitting shoes and humbly "borrowed" them.

"Can I ask you something?" I said while tying my shoes.

"Go right ahead."

"It'd be nice to get your name. Mine's Hiroaki Dewa. Yours?"

"Otoha. Otoha Judou." She toyed with a police baton she'd nabbed off the cop's body. "Just Otoha will do."

What a character...

And that was how I first met the self-proclaimed zombie guru, Otoha Judou.

Chapter 2: A World in RuinZ

It shouldn't come as a surprise that I had no place to go. That was why I chose to stick with Otoha after leaving the police station.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"I did once. Not anymore."

Having someone around amid all the death is reassuring, and that certain someone also happens to be incredibly knowledgeable about everything zombie-related. What more could I ask for?

She allowed me to tag along without much deliberation.

"Lone survivors banding together to weather the apocalypse is a staple after all." She nodded listlessly.

"A staple of what?"

"Zombie movies."

"Alrighty then." She appeared to have a thing for zombie flicks. That would explain her desensitization to zombie-induced horrors. Still, I couldn't help but feel she was letting the line between fiction and reality blur a little too much in her mind.

Not that there's much making the whole "reality" side super concrete anyway.

According to Otoha, the entire world was in ruins. Apparently, the infection had swept across the globe in only two weeks or so, almost like a fast-forwarded zombie movie.

Japan, in particular, got the short end of the stick. The initial mass zombie outbreak happened in a single day. Even though a state of emergency was declared right away, the entire country fell to its knees not even a week later. They couldn't determine the source of the outbreak, nor could they push back the horde of zombies in time.

The government took its sweet time recognizing the outbreak as a serious threat, and by the time they did, it was already too late. Three days post-outbreak, it collapsed.

Four days post-outbreak, most of the population had been infected, and only a few survivors remained among the horde of walkers.

"How's the situation overseas?"

"There were riots over at CDC HQ."

"What does that stand for again?"

"Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The U.S. is screwed. Europe too, most likely."

"Great, just what I needed..."

This was all new to me, as I had effectively shut myself off from the outside world ever since entering NEETHood. That would explain why basically no one besides me was online this past week. They probably had more pressing concerns to attend to.

Even as the world was coming to an end, the servers were still up and running, thanks to solar power and the smart grid system—which, from what I understood, was a self-sufficient, fully automated electricity network, which was why the servers hadn't gone down even at the zenith of our doom.

I Stepped Out of My Room One Day and the World Was in Ruins, so I Teamed up with the Local Zombie Guru to Weather the Apocalypse! That'd make for a snappy title.

It took God seven days to create the world, so maybe another seven days was just the right amount of time to destroy it.

Trivial quandaries aside, I had to decide on a course of action one way or another. My family was now a pack of zombies, and I didn't care much for any of my former classmates, so I could safely check "looking into their well-being" off my list. Maybe I would've cared more in my pre-NEET days, but now my entire world consisted only of FPS games.

I would've tried to contact my FPS buds by now if it weren't for the fact that, aside from maybe two, I knew nothing about any of them. We had never felt the need to share personal info, so now we had no way to get in touch.

In any case, I may as well just focus on surviving for now.

Thing is, I don't have the chops to make it on my own. That's where Otoha comes in. She's made it all on her own this entire time; it only makes sense to stay by her side and absorb every little morsel of wisdom she's willing to throw my way.

"This sewer tunnel is ginormous."

We were, in fact, in an underground sewer tunnel.

At the moment, the two of us were situated in the main sewer line, where all the neighborhood wastewater pooled together into one nasty body of liquid. There was plenty of space above our heads despite the fact that we were traveling along elevated walkways.

"You okay back there?" Otoha asked with a sudden turn of her head, as though she'd just remembered my existence. She was leading the way with a shovel in her right hand and a flashlight in her left.

"Not exactly... I think I'm gonna hurl."

Predictably, the stench down here was unbearable. It had a moldy kick to it, the kind you could almost *feel*. My stomach wasn't taking it too well.

"Can you hold it in?"

"Of course, just... just gimme a sec." I raised my hand to signal for a quick stop.

How is she holding up this well? There has to be some trick behind it. Or maybe she's just noseblind...? Either way, there's no way I'm gonna let myself show weakness in front of a girl. That'd be the end of me for real.

"Try not to get any on the bag."

"Thanks for the concern," I grumbled.

I had a backpack chock-full of “borrowed” goods strapped to my back. It was not a joy to carry in the slightest.

I’m starting to think she only took me in to be her pack mule...

“Something wrong?” She looked back once more, but this time around, the shovel hanging from her hand felt almost intimidating.

“It’s nothing. Nope. Nada. No siree.”

“Is that so?” After tilting her head to the side for a moment, she resumed walking.

I’m just being delusional. There’s no way she’d do away with me after I finish carrying all her stuff... right?

As much I would’ve liked to believe otherwise, it wasn’t entirely implausible. She was just *that* much of a mystery to me. Not only were we complete strangers, but she also had that permanent poker face which didn’t help matters.

“Anyway...” I decided to change the topic. “There’s got to be a good reason why we’re crawling around in the sewers, right?” I couldn’t shake the feeling that we could get boxed in all too easily.

“Sure is. The encounter rate here is lower, and the severe odor helps mask our scent.”

“Makes sense.”

Zombies were like a broken record—for the most part anyway. When not satisfying their hunger, they mindlessly mimicked past behavioral patterns. Thus, we were less likely to run into a zombie in a place scarcely visited by humans.

As for the second point, I wasn’t too sure about how zombies could detect their prey, but it certainly didn’t hurt that the sewer practically eliminated the two most likely contenders: sound and smell. In that sense, this is pretty much as good a place as we could be in.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

“I’ve been down here countless times. I know what I’m doing.”

“You make it sound like you’ve been roaming the sewers since long before the apocalypse.”

I doubt that. For one, it’s probably illegal, and two, you’d have to be an actual nutjob to even consider it.

“As an added precaution, yes.”

“Are you serious?”

Isn’t it kinda hypocritical of me to call her out on “weird” behavior when one of my own flimsy justifications for indulging in FPS games is that it basically doubles as army experience? Then again, my weird thing has at least a little basis in reality; hers is pretty damn out there.

Maybe I’m just biased; I’m pretty sure a number of Americans would see things in a different light. I hear there’s a niche market over there that sells firearms based on their zombie-fighting properties.

“Up,” she urged, climbing up a rusty ladder nearby.

“I can’t wait to get some fresh air,” I said as I followed suit.

As safe as the tunnels were, my nostrils had had just about enough. I would've gladly run the risk of bumping into another zombie if that meant breathable air.

"Wait..."

Here I was fully expecting to emerge in the middle of a sidewalk, but instead I found myself in a lifeless room lined with rows upon rows of stacked boxes.

"What is this place?"

"You'll see." She closed up the manhole we'd come out of, went over to the door, and swung it wide open.

I was greeted by an empty parking lot. All those neatly painted lines, perfectly measured down to the millimeter for maximum space efficiency, and yet not a single parked vehicle in sight.

"Really hits home."

"Over here." Otoha was already walking over to a nearby two-story building.

It looked oddly familiar. That was when I happened to catch the words "Mister Watson" and "hardware store" on the side of the building.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said as I turned around to make sure this wasn't just a bad trip.

Heaps of boxes were stacked together by the entrance, brandishing labels such as "DOG FOOD," "TOILET PAPER," "BOOKCASE PARTS," "STORAGE BOXES," and the like.

We're at the local hardware store. I remember coming here back in my middle school days... So that's why it looked familiar.

"Why the hardware store of all places?!" I was under the impression that we'd been heading for a military base of some kind, but apparently not.

"It's what the trope calls for."

"Now's not the time to be bringing up tropes! You're going to get us kill —"

"Pipe down." She held down the back of my head with one hand and pushed the other firmly against my mouth.

Her soft, dainty hand came in contact with my lips, and I could feel something snap inside my brain. I hadn't felt a girl's touch in... well, too many years. She was far from a girly girl, yet my heart wouldn't stop racing.

"Hold your breath," she hissed, forcefully pushing me against a nearby wall. She then pressed her body against mine, leaving zero breathing space between us.

Is this one of those fabled "girl-slams-you-against-the-wall" moments?! I never thought I'd live to see the day. I think I might just pass out on the spot. It feels like my heart is gonna burst out of my chest at any moment. She might be weird, and lacking in the expressiveness department, but that means nothing in the face of her extraordinary cuteness.

"The coast is clear." At last, she released me from bittersweet captivity. "Keep your voice down and follow my lead." With that, she tiptoed away.

Oh, so that's what all that was about.

Her forcibly shutting my yap was to avoid detection, which meant that this place wasn't as zombie-free as I had initially thought.

I'll trust you for now.

I cautiously scanned the area before tagging along behind her.

We circled to the side of the building, at which point she started making her way up the fire escape.

"Isn't there an easier way in?"

"I've barred off all entry points besides the one on the roof. Oh, and watch your step."

That was when I noticed that two steps were missing right in the middle. If somebody were to go up the fire escape without paying attention, they'd surely plummet to their doom.

"This is genius."

Zombies didn't possess the mental faculties to consider their steps, let alone overcome a broken staircase. It was foolproof.

I handed the backpack to Otoha and carefully straddled the booby trap. She handed it right back to me, and we continued on our way.

Moments later, the rooftop was in sight.

"Crazy how abrupt the transition is from down there to up here."

Aside from a shack tucked away in one of the corners, the rooftop was pretty much just neatly spaced rows of solar panels stretching on and on. The entire area was fenced off, as you might expect.

I walked over to the fence. The complete absence of large buildings around the area made for a spectacular view. At least, it would've been, if not for large patches of dark smoke here and there. I half-expected fire truck sirens to be blaring all over the place, but instead there was just silence. Disturbing and uneasy silence. No signs of human life anywhere.

Zombies, on the other hand, were all over the place, making their presence known. Dozens—no, *hundreds* of them were creeping around the hardware store's outer fence. The awkward attempts at walking and the nearly translucent, pale skin stuck out like a sore thumb, even at a distance. They were spilling out across the roads, and even the nearby park was swarming with them.

Zombies as far as the eye could see. One had a large metal pipe going through its stomach, one had a knife sticking out of its neck, and the list just went on and on. They'd all suffered horrific injuries, yet they wouldn't stop moving.

There was not a single living person among them.

The entire town had been overtaken.

"She wasn't joking around..." I muttered.

Back when we'd first met, Otoha told me, in no uncertain terms, that Japan was in shambles. Despite that, I'd wanted to see it for myself. I'd figured that maybe she was just blowing things out of proportion; maybe the

zombie outbreak was just a localized phenomenon which only affected this tiny area. I'd desperately wanted to believe that.

My hope was shattered right then and there.

I couldn't yet tell if the entire country had been swept away, but it became clear that at least this town had been overrun and that the government wasn't taking any measures to sort things out.

"You coming or what?" she called out, glancing at me over her shoulder.

"Be right there."

I gave myself a moment to really take in the view before turning away and running off without ever looking back.



Otoha wasn't kidding when she said she'd barred off all entry points except one. The front entrance had its shutters down, and the windows were barricaded, save for a few tiny ones by the ceiling that were just for ventilation.

"Nothing's getting through here."

Her anti-zombie measures didn't end there. The entire area had been remade into a hedge maze of sorts by arranging pieces of furniture, household appliances, and various other knickknacks into a chain of barricades.

"Did you do this all by yourself?" I asked in awe.

"I took heavy inspiration from the movies."

"That's insane."

The genius behind the labyrinthine approach was that it was perfect for artificially extending the walking distance between point A and point B, not to mention the fact that it severely limited mobility. Some real-life castles employed similar structures. I too had once had the displeasure of playing through an FPS stage built with this design in mind. The lack of effective cover had been super frustrating.

I took a moment to look Otoha up and down. The girl was scrawny with a lingering air of fatigue. Everything about her being screamed indifference to life, as though she'd stared into the abyss and it had stared right back. Anyway, she wasn't the type you'd expect to be this proactive in her survival efforts, but looks can be deceiving.

"Want to see my weapon stash?"

"You have one?"

"Naturally," she said with a nod. Her deadpan expression and sluggish motions made it hard to tell how she was feeling, but a subtle glint in her eyes betrayed her underlying giddiness.

I was then dragged over to a long table resting in the corner.

"Voilà!"

I whistled.

What a collection.

It had all the staples: crowbars, hammers, nail guns, steel bats, metal pipes, all that jazz. More importantly, there were multiple “combo” weapons she’d made by attaching two or more items together.

“Behold, my *pièce de résistance*.” She busted out a mop handle with two kitchen knives sticking out at the top. It seemed almost like a makeshift spear, or her own household spin on one.

“It’s modeled after the *sasumata*, hence the two-pronged design. The knives got all wobbly after only a few uses, though. I’ll have to look into that.”

“I see.” The thing in her hands was inspired by a pronged polearm originally wielded by samurai. I couldn’t help but notice her roundabout way of saying she’d field-tested the weapon, but I tried to ignore it.

Her tone was flat, yet the flair with which she spoke was rather unsettling.

What a wacko.

Not that I could complain, seeing as this odd fixation of hers ended up working in our favor.

“Routine check-up time,” she said just as I was getting a feel for one of the steel pipes.

“Routine wha—” I whipped my head around and came face-to-face with two criminally soft mounds of supple flesh.

“Uh, err, well, let’s not do anything we’d regret sober!” I squeaked. She was, for whatever reason, taking off her clothes.

Is this her way of saying we should make like Adam and Eve?! Or maybe she’s suggesting we huddle together to keep warm, or—

“What’re you talking about?” The way she said it made me realize that I was the one getting worked up over nothing. Maybe I should’ve read the mood a little more carefully.

“Whatever. Anyway, I’m looking for bite marks.”

“How come?”

“To see if I’ve been infected.” She pulled off her jacket, shirt, and pants in a flash.

The soft, porcelain skin buried beneath layers of bloodstained, mud-smeared clothing had little Johnny’s interest piqued in more ways than one.

Jokes aside, I wanted to kick myself for ever having thought of her as “scrawny”—after taking a good, hard look at every one of her silky smooth assets, I realized that this box didn’t do a mote of justice to her impeccable proportions, and in the following essay, I will explain why...

“Wh-Why go through all that?” I asked, averting my gaze.

One might fall under the impression that I was just your average overly self-conscious teen getting horny because “teens will be teens,” but they’d be flat-out *wrong*. According to this one book I read, captives under extreme duress tend to develop a strong emotional bond with their captors to boost their chances of... leaving behind genetic material. Actually, forget I ever brought that up.

"Our nervous system produces adrenaline in response to perceived threats, which decreases the body's ability to feel pain," she said matter-of-factly while feeling around her body. "Wouldn't want to end up like that one character who goes zombie overnight and chows down on everyone's brains just because they were afraid of causing a rift in the group. That'd be way too clichéd."

"Fair enough, I guess."

"You know, zombie bites didn't always work this way. Originally, zombies were thought of as the wicked creations of Haitian necromancers who raised people from the dead through the application of 'zombie powder.' These zombies didn't possess the ability to infect people." Halfway into the quasi infodump, she began fumbling around in her sports bra.

Ooh, lemme adjust my viewing angle, aaand... Crap, she's already finished.

"That all changed due in large part to Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead*, which instilled the concept of zombies possessing vampire-esque features into our collective imagination, greatly reshaping our understanding of the creature. Another major development came from the beloved horror game franchise *Resident Evil*, which spread the now-widely accepted idea that pathogens cause zombification."

"Yoo-hoo, earth to Otoha..."

"Judging by the news, this particular outbreak follows all the preestablished patterns to a tee. The victim gets bitten or scratched, develops an intense fever after a set amount of time, dies, and then turns zombie anywhere between one and twelve hours later.

"Through deductive reasoning, we can conclude that this is a highly infectious disease caused by some unknown pathogen. Determining and isolating anyone infected in the early stages of the disease is absolutely vital."

Otoha rambled on and on, oblivious to her surroundings. She seemed to get awfully talkative whenever the conversation shifted to a topic even tangentially related to zombies. It was as if the mere mention of them brought out a spark hidden deep inside her.

"Anyway, that's why I need you to undress for me," she concluded, turning to face me.

"How about no?"

"It's for our collective safety."

It was a reasonable demand, sure. From her perspective, I was just some rando who she'd oh-so-benevolently chosen to take off the streets. By all means, she had the right to confirm whether or not I posed a potential threat.

That's all well and good, but would it kill her to handle this whole thing with just a liiittle more tact?

"Do we really have to do this? There's gotta be a better way."

"There isn't, so strip."

"You're killing me here."

"Chop-chop. What's the big deal, anyway?"

"Oh, you know..."

What am I supposed to say? That little Johnny wants to play?

"I'm asking you a question." She took a step closer and looked me dead in the eyes.

Shoo! Stay back, foul wench!

"You've been bitten, haven't you?"

"You presumptuous little—wait, when did that get there?!" A shovel had mysteriously materialized in her hands.

I've gotta act fast, or my head's gonna get cracked like a melon over some false accusations!

"Okay, you asked for it!"

I might want to die immediately after, but at least I'll live to fight another day.

I whipped off all my clothes in one swift motion, leaving me in only my tighty-whities—if you don't count the dog tag, that is. I had "Hound Nine" engraved on it as a half-joking way of bringing the virtual world along with me, as well as various tidbits of personal information, such as my birthday, sex, and blood type. Maybe having all that personal info below the code name seemed contradictory, but that's a story for another day.

"Feast your eyes on this!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, brandishing the monstrous bulge in my underwear.

"So, lady, how d'you like them apples?"

She ran her eyes over my upper body in silence. Really took her sweet time, too... But her poker face cracked as soon as she looked down, and she let out a little gasp.

What is that supposed to... Oh God, I've been bit, haven't I? I'm now doomed to wander this earth grumbling and groaning with the rest of my zombie kin. Why, why, why?!

Otoha remained frozen in place. Her cheeks took on a tinge of red, which grew more and more pronounced as the seconds ticked by.

"You feeling alright?"



"Erm, checkup's over."

"Am I in the clear?"

"P-Put your clothes back on."

"So no bite marks?"

"No. Now please, put something on," said the half-naked girl in front of me.

You know, my little Johnny wouldn't be as rowdy if you'd taken the time to cover yourself up first! Can't say that, though, or I'll look like a real douche canoe.

"I took it too far, my bad." I picked my clothes up off the floor and quickly put them on.

Otoha had her signature deadpan expression slapped on as usual, but she couldn't stop blushing the entire time. Maintaining eye contact seemed nigh impossible too; her eyes were darting all over the place.

Call me presumptuous, but I believe it's fair to say that she's feeling a wee bit embarrassed right now. So, the girl's got some emotions under that hardened shell after all.



Once things settled down a notch, we decided to get a bite to eat in the staff room. Personally, I'd skipped breakfast, lunch, and dinner because there were more pressing matters to attend to—y'know, coming to terms with the whole zombie apocalypse thing and whatnot. After the initial shock had faded, my empty stomach had started waging war against me once again.

"Want some?" Otoha asked, holding up a can of crackers she had stashed away in a survival kit.

"You're too kind."

I've been running for my life all day in the middle of a zombie apocalypse, and all I get are these lousy crackers? What a disappointment. Well, I guess things could always be worse.

I tossed a single cracker into my mouth, fully expecting it to taste like wet chalk.

"Hey, these ain't half bad."

"An empty belly is the best cook," as they say, but these are actually pretty tasty.

"You'd be surprised how good canned food is these days." Otoha was sitting cross-legged on a chair, nibbling away at her cracker like a cute little possum.

"I hear Japanese MREs are simply delectable," I said between bites. "I'm not surprised that the same is true for regular old canned food, too."

"What's an MRE?"

"Meal, Ready-to-Eat. In other words, military rations. If you're ever in the market for a military expert, look no further than your friendly neighborhood FPS gamer god."

Come to think of it, we really know jack squat about each other. Not that we've had the time to bond over a nice cup of tea or something, given the circumstances.

"Coolio." She nodded and took a swig of bottled water. "Is that where your knowledge of guns comes from?"

"You could say that, yeah. Never saw one in real life until today, though."

My gun obsession was what had led me down the FPS rabbit hole to begin with. The only reason I could more or less disassemble a gun was because I'd fiddled around with all kinds of gun controllers, even if it didn't help my gameplay.

"Anyway, what about you? Who might you be?"

"Just your average high schooler."

"You sure? Something about the way you tore those zombies a new one didn't exactly scream 'average' to me."

"I just set my mind to it."

"Uh-huh..."

Call me crazy, but I wasn't entirely convinced that your "average" high school girl was capable of committing cold-blooded murder or scraping by with military-tier survival skills.

In what twisted, mixed-up world would anyone consider that to be the norm? Welp, at least she's pure where it counts.

I fondly remembered Otoha's flustered face when she caught a glimpse of my you-know-what.

Then again, who am I to judge?

"Were there any other survivors when you first got here?"

"Nope, just zombies. I made sure to dispose of every last one of them."

"I see..." A chill ran down my spine as I pictured the carnage.

"Did that upset you?" she asked, tilting her head to one side.

"Maybe a little?"

As much as I hated to admit it, having another set or two of hands would've really boosted our chances of survival. I would've loved to believe Otoha and I could take on the world, but there was only so much the two of us were capable of.

"You can call dibs on the next batch, then. My treat."

"Pardon?"

"Taking down the next batch of zombies, just like you wanted."

"You've got the wrong idea, sis. I don't want nothin' to do with it."

Tone down the projection, will ya?

"It's for your own good. You need the practice."

"Fair enough, but I'd like to keep it professional."

"Aim for the temple; if you go any higher, there's a good chance your blow'll glance off, like this. Roundness of the skull and all."

"Could you please be so kind as to NOT wave that dirty shovel all over the place?"

I was very much open to the idea of learning to fend off zombies myself, but there was just one problem.

"You're pretty good at this, aren't you?"

Otoha's indifference to all the death and suffering around her made it hard for me to fully trust her. Most sane people would completely lock up at the sight of a zombie—no way in hell would they have the composure to chop one's head off without batting an eye. What set her apart from the overwhelming majority?

"What did you expect from a zombie buff?"

"I don't quite follow..."

Being knowledgeable about zombies was one thing; claiming that said knowledge magically translated into real-life experience was another. That was like saying I'd make a top-tier soldier after investing enough time into FPS games. Oh, wait...

"The only reason you're alive right now is because of all the zombie media I've consumed over the years, which has allowed me to visualize every aspect of a potential zombie apocalypse."

"You don't say..."

"Not that I ever expected it to come in handy."

"Who would've, in all honesty? I'm still struggling to come to terms with everything, too. It's all so surreal."

"It's a dream come true, isn't it?" The light in her eyes, the blush on her cheeks... it was almost as if she'd been waiting for this to happen her entire life.

You're cute and all, but you should really see a shrink.



"I say we turn in for the night," Otoha said. She had just gone and slipped into some comfy workwear.

"Agreed."

Any other self-conscious teen 'round my age would have creamed at the mere thought of getting to pass the night in relatively close proximity to the fairer sex, but frankly, I wasn't in the mood.

It's been a long day, so cut me some slack!

I was pooped and in desperate need of some good, quality shut-eye, but the ever-looming threat of a potential zombie ambush kept me wide awake. How lovely.

"Looks like we're in the clear." Otoha was keeping tabs on the CCTV footage from a six-monitor setup tucked away in the corner of the staff room. A few of the cameras were situated outdoors, which wasn't exactly ideal, but the indoor coverage was about as good as it was going to get.

"Make yourself comfortable anywhere but the couch—that one's mine. You should find whatever you need to sleep in the store. Just be a dear and don't accidentally set off any of the booby traps while you're at it."

"How many are there?"

"You might lose sleep over it, so I'll keep it a secret."

"Didn't really feel like sleeping anyway."

"You should. You'll need to be rested for tomorrow."

"What's happening tomorrow?"

"You'll see." With that, she padded over to the couch with a cute little yawn and passed out on the spot.

You'd think that with all the zombie media she's absorbed throughout the years, she'd know better than to doze off in the presence of a man who could've been broken beyond repair and seeking to take out all his pent-up frustrations on her in a terribly cruel and violent way. Who would hear her screams and come to the rescue if I actually were one of those men?

Nobody, that's who.

"You really need to get a better grasp of the human condition," I muttered before turning my attention to the CCTV footage. The images flickered in and out at fixed intervals as the six monitors had to accommodate for dozens upon dozens of cameras. I happened upon one of Otoha's fabled booby traps after an intense bout of staring.

A little sign read "DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE, KEEP OUT." Otoha had taken the time to write it out herself... How cute. The trap was about as basic as could be: a couple of batteries wired to a doorknob above a floor drenched with water.

Would an electric current even affect a zombie...? Oh, right, Galvani's frog leg experiments showed that electric shocks could be used to mimic signals from the central nervous system. That means a good zap would stop the zombie dead in its tracks... Kind of like Mom, now that I think about it. Given that explosives and chemical weapons are off-limits for obvious reasons, this is about as lethal as it'll get.

But the fun didn't stop there.

"Good lord. How does she come up with this stuff?"

Chimes, trip wires, loosely stacked boxes... Otoha's general approach seemed centered around stalling the zombies or sounding an alarm more than anything else. Still, the sheer variety was genuinely mind-boggling.

How the hell is her apocalypse model this detailed?! Her eccentricity really isn't doing her any favors. If she just did away with the weird parts of her personality, sims would be flocking to her like flies swarming hot dung.

Although, to be fair, I wouldn't be where I am right now if not for her quirkiness. I'd probably be dead, watching the zombie cop moan as he stuffs his face with my juicy spleen, just like everyone else.

Imagine going about your daily life without a single care in the world, believing that even if the world does come to an end one day, you won't be around long enough to experience it firsthand... only to look outside the window after finishing off the most delicious cup of tea and see one of your neighbors chowing down on your other neighbor in plain sight.

That would be enough to drive anyone mad—or, at the very least, cause them to teeter too close for comfort on the brink of insanity. Otoha seems like she's really enjoying herself, but I'm always fighting off the urge to

retreat into the deepest recesses of my mind and pretend none of this ever happened.

For all I know, I might just be a deranged lunatic, throwing myself against the padded walls of my cell while everyone else blissfully goes about their day.

My mom, my dad, my little brother—they're all out there making the most out of life. They might have their disagreements, but in the end, they'll always be there for one another. I get to enjoy a life of solitude, and they get to enjoy life without a deadbeat son. It's a win-win. What's not to like?

"Oh, who am I kidding..." I was getting teary-eyed, and my nose had started to run.

As much as I tried tricking myself into believing I was better off without my family weighing me down, and that their deaths meant absolutely nothing to me, deep down inside I knew I'd go back to my previous life in a heartbeat if I could.

"This is what I get."

I hated my family, I hated society, and I hated everyone in it. For so long, I had wished they would all die and leave me be.

You got what you wished for. Hope you're happy.

"Sorry 'bout that, high school girl I never got the pleasure of meeting."

Or maybe I had met her. Never cared much for any of my classmates, to be honest. Their bullying didn't make my life any easier.

Thankfully, it never got physical, but they had always openly laughed and made fun of me, as though they expected me to sit there and take it like a good little boy. The teacher knew all about what was going on but didn't bother to intervene.

They called me all sorts of names, ranging from base level stuff like "weirdo" and "loser" to "school shooter in the making" whenever they felt like adding a touch of pizzazz to their usual lineup. Allegedly, this was all in the name of toughening me up.

No one's a villain in their own story, I suppose.

There was no deeper reason behind it, though; my class had needed a target they could safely point their fingers at, preferably someone who was different from the rest. I just happened to be their scapegoat. No more, no less.

How ironic is it that their blind adherence to this flimsy concept of "normal" is what allowed the zombie outbreak to spread as effectively as it did?

It's almost as if my darkest desires were granted by some higher power with a twisted sense of humor. Maybe if I'd kept those desires to myself, this could've all been avoided. Then again, hindsight is 20/20. Those people are dead and it's all my fault. I killed the—

"Here." Otoha suddenly pulled out a bulky biker helmet from underneath her couch and handed it to me.

"What for?"

"It muffles sound," she said, staring into my eyes.

"Uh, thanks?"

She nodded and then went right back to sleep.

What did she mean by that? Oh, of course, it's to deter zombies.

But where did she learn that from? Otoha doesn't strike me as a biker chick, nor did I see a bike parked next to the police station. She went there with the express purpose of scavenging, and it would've been way easier to load up her spoils on a bike than carry them all the way back on foot. Plus, zooming past the zombies would've been a breeze.

Actually, lemme think about this for a moment. Why was there a helmet stashed under her couch, of all places? Did she expect me to have a nervous breakdown? Highly unlikely.

But... what if she had a meltdown of her own, and it got so bad that she needed to put on a helmet to avoid attracting zombies?

What if that deadpan expression isn't a sign of indifference, but rather a tangible representation of a broken individual who went through a range of emotions so extreme that it left behind nothing but a battered, hollow shell of her former self?

"I had you all wrong," I whispered.

Without realizing it, I'd been engaging in the same exact line of thought that had led to my own bullying.

What's normal and what's not is relative. Why should I, or anyone else for that matter, get to judge her by some arbitrary set of standards? Eccentricity shouldn't be rejected. If anything, it should be celebrated. I'm living proof that someone's oddities can do the world some good.

"Owe you one," I said and popped on the helmet.

The world around me now felt distant, as though I had plunged into an endless void, never to return. It was strangely comforting.

It must've been hard sharing this little piece of your world with me, but rest assured, it's in good hands.

I curled up in the corner of the room and remained motionless as my consciousness slowly drifted away.

Chapter 3: Faces Behind the NameZ

A week or so later, Otoha and I were out and about like it was no big deal. The human brain's ability to adapt could be downright frightening sometimes. My pre-apocalypse self felt like a completely different person, a distant memory of times long past. Or maybe I was just going cuckoo, who knows?

"C'mere," Otoha said, waving me over.

We were on a mission to scavenge what we could from the local supermarket, which we'd entered via a busted-up sliding door. The loose shards of broken glass and empty cans haphazardly scattered across the floor served as a mini obstacle course of sorts; we had to carefully tiptoe around it all without making a whole lot of noise. Our rubber soles muffled our footsteps, but they were hardly a fail-safe in the event that one of us took a wrong step.

"This stench is something else," I muttered, wrinkling my nose.

All the fresh produce was on the first floor, which had transformed into a breeding ground for disease. The wretched, malodorous bouquet was mostly composed of spoiled fruit and veggies, with a hint of rotten seafood. Most of the meats were packed up tight, so they weren't able to join in on the fun.

As a result of breakthroughs in solar-powered technology in the last few years, many companies had finally been enticed to hop on the gravy train. The harder they fought for market dominance, the more solar panels were produced, and the resulting supply was far more than anyone had initially speculated. To put things into perspective, lower-middle-class households could reasonably afford to begin the transition to solar power, provided their energy consumption wasn't anything out of the norm, hence why the electricity in my house never went out.

Certain businesses, like our current base of operations, could afford to make a full switch to eco-friendly energy without it weighing too heavily on their finances. Supermarkets, on the other hand, spent more money on power than any other operating expense, mostly because of the inefficiency of their cold-storage facilities and refrigerating equipment. Making the transition at this point in time wasn't an economically viable move for them, to say the least.

"Up we go," Otoha murmured, pointing to a flight of stairs.

Worst-case scenario, we could've taken the escalator—which was broken, of course—but the much-safer staircase was in perfect condition. It'd be too easy for us to lose our footing on an escalator, especially if we tried to hurry.

"Whoa there, cowboy." I grabbed Otoha by the wrist, forcefully dragged her back behind cover, and whipped out my trusty pocket mirror.

I said “trusty,” but it was really just a plain old mirror framed in cheap plastic. I’d happened to pick it out among an endless sea of carbon copies we had lying around in the warehouse. It had a generous surface area and was easily expendable, which made my job a whole lot easier.

“What’re you doing?”

“Zombie-spotting the old-fashioned way.”

The path to the staircase was full of blind spots.

“With that thing?”

“It gets the job done.” I held out the mirror and gradually adjusted the angle so I could look around every nook and cranny.

“My FPS days weren’t for nothin’, baby.”

Funny how it took the literal collapse of human civilization for my FPS skill set to come in handy. Not that I’m complaining.

With a little time and patience, we could avoid running headfirst into that one zombie lurking right around the corner. We weren’t really in a rush anyway. I was really hoping this place would be zombie-free, but there were four of them lollygagging around by the back door right next to the staircase.

“Bingo.”

“How many?”

“A couple. We goin’ in guns blazing or what?” I unholstered my SAKURA M360J.

Otoha had been hesitant to hand the gun over to me at first, but she’d come around in the end. When she caved, she mumbled something about putting it in “better hands.” Naturally, I’d cleaned it inside and out just to be safe.

“The gun is our last resort. Got it?”

Hmph. What a spoilsport.

From this brief exchange, one might get the impression that Otoha was the levelheaded one here, keeping the trigger-happy lunatic in check at all times. I knew better, however; I’d seen her fidgeting with that shovel more than enough times, itching to bash in some skulls. She was better at suppressing her violent urges, but she certainly wasn’t free of them.

“They keep pacing back and forth for some reason.”

Something didn’t feel right. It was almost as if they were cycling through a predetermined set of actions, one of which was grabbing fruit off the shelf and immediately putting it back down.

“Notice the aprons? Those are employees.”

“Now that you mention it...” I hadn’t noticed the aprons at first because they were caked in multiple layers of blood, pus, dirt, and everything else imaginable.

“Seems like we’re dealing with a subtype that mimics past behavioral patterns.”

“What is this, an RPG?”

This was just some light banter between two partners in crime. I knew she wasn't intentionally downplaying the situation; it was just her *modus operandi*. Who was I to judge the actions of other people?

"Jokes aside," I continued, "are you saying they're *stocking* the shelves and not just randomly picking stuff up and putting it down again?"

"Yup. They're not stopping any time soon either. I say we take the escalator."

Slinking from cover to cover, we reached the escalator and carefully made our way up the steps. The stench from the first floor permeated all the way up here, but it was leagues more tolerable.

Hallelujah.

We walked up to the canned food aisle and threw our backpacks on the ground. Otoha's call to hunker down in the hardware store had been pure genius. Even though she insisted she was just mindlessly abiding by established movie tropes, we still had access to so much cool stuff, including these backpacks, as a direct result of her compendium of zombie knowledge. It was hard not to appreciate her existence on every possible level.

"Grab anything you can find."

We chucked the cans in one by one.

"Toss, don't throw."

"Kay."

A single firearm wouldn't do much against an entire swarm of zombies, but it sure was nice to have one by my side, even if just for the false sense of security. I mean, between the snubby five-centimeter barrel and the five-chamber cylinder, I didn't see myself landing a good deal of my shots. Still, it was reassuring to know that I could avoid having to engage zombies at point-blank range, where any minor miscalculation might lead to my untimely demise, so long as I had this baby here to protect me.

Going in guns blazing, though? Not a good idea by any stretch of the imagination. As fun as it'd be to bust out some bullets, I still wasn't over the whole "killing humans" thing, and I had no reason to believe that'd change somewhere down the line. I feared I'd lose an integral part of my own humanity if I did ever get to that point. Oh, and the loud-ass gunshots were also a huge issue, which was why I had a crowbar on me too.

It's good to have a backup plan in case Otoha needs help, and I don't wanna attract every zombie in the goddamn neighborhood.

"This won't cut it," she whispered. "Time for another raid."

"You sure?"

The shelves were suspiciously empty, but we had managed to score over 20 cans. I figured they'd last us a decent while, at least.

"Very. Now let's get going."

Should've known better than to question the shot-caller.

"Lead the way."

Just as we were about to head out, a shadow materialized right behind Otoha.

"Hah!" She instinctively turned around and swung down her shovel, which got lodged in one of the shelves.

For Pete's sake, man, you should assume there's a zombie lurking around every corner! Otherwise, you end up in a situation like this where one just crawls underneath the shelf as soon as you aren't looking. How do you not put two and two together?! If there are multiple zombies "stocking" shelves down on the first floor, obviously there might be at least one doing the exact same thing on the second. Doesn't take a genius to figure that out!

"Otoha!" At that moment, my body took over.

Whether it was the killer reflexes I'd developed through years of FPS gaming or something else entirely, I had my finger pressing down on the trigger before I even realized it.

The gunshot echoed throughout the entire store.

I watched as the bullet nailed the zombie right under its nose, causing its head to violently snap backward. Its fingers twitched and clenched in the air, and then it collapsed to the floor.

"I did it!"

This was the first time I had ever fired a gun.

Went pretty well, I'd say. Although my trigger control was a bit off, now that I think about it. To be fair, the trigger pull on double-action revolvers is long and deliberate, so maybe I shouldn't beat myself up about it too much. If anything, I should pat myself on the back for managing to reproduce a proper firing grip under those circumstances.

Aiming for the cerebrum was the best bet I had in that situation. I ended up being just off the mark, but I'd luckily managed to hit its cervical spine, instantly disabling the thing's nervous system. Had the bullet trajectory dipped any lower, it would *not* have been pretty.

"Bow before me, mortals!" I cried, striking a heroic pose.

Otoha didn't seem to find it nearly as epic. "I thought I told you—"

"Spare me the nagging."

If I hadn't taken the shot, she would've been bitten or maybe even worse. However, I had to admit that my heroic act came at the cost of alerting every last zombie in the building.

"I say we hightail it out of here." I grabbed Otoha's hand and pulled her toward the escalator.

The zombies were going to come flooding up from the stairs, so our only escape route was the dreaded escalator. Well, at least it was close to the entrance.

"Hey, Hiroaki..." she whispered in a sickly sweet voice.

"Otoha? Is something wro—" I turned around, only to see a pair of puppy-dog eyes staring up at me.

"Thanks for saving me back there."

"Erm, don't mention it." My heart began drumming hard against my ribcage, threatening to break free.

Curse you, Otoha! How am I supposed to focus on the matter at hand when you're over here pulling the "stoic type gets all melty" card on me! With great power comes great responsibility!

"Yikes." I knew I'd lured them in, but I never expected there to be this many crammed into one place. "Where are they all coming from?!"

If we trip on the escalator steps, it's game over. You can do this, just take it nice and e—

"Hiyah." With an endearingly monotone shout, Otoha kicked a stray shopping cart straight toward the zombie horde. It knocked one of them over, which then toppled the others like a bunch of bowling pins.

"Annnd strike! Nice one."

"All in a day's work." The corners of her lips raised very slightly in what could be contextually deduced to be a smirk.

Don't give in. Keep your head in the game.

"I have an idea, but I need you to trust me!" I shouted.

"Why do I have a bad feeling about thi—"

Without waiting for her to finish, I picked her up and slid down the handrail. Why? Because it was an action movie staple, of course. Also, how often would I get to do this in public without some manager screaming in my ear immediately after?



"Eeeep!" She let out a girly scream on the way down. I could've sworn I saw her blushing too, but now wasn't the time to read into that.

"Race ya." I plopped her back down and issued a friendly challenge. The zombies were now at the very top of the escalator; I figured we could make it to the exit by the time they came down. We nodded in unison and broke into a sprint.

"Good thing they're slow runners."

"You can say that again."

Might just be me, but I feel like we've really been hitting it off these days. It's kinda nice, honestly.

A little while later, we came upon a nearby manhole. I pried it open with my crowbar, and we shimmied down as quickly as we could.



Once we made it back to our base, we took on the monotonous task of sorting our spoils by expiration date and stashing them away in the appropriate boxes.

A bit off-topic, but apparently our home sweet home once had its own little emergency food supply: instant noodles, chips, the canned cracker goodness, and more. However, most of it had been cleaned out by the time Otoha got here.

Funnily enough, the supermarket we'd just looted fit that same description. If I had to hazard a guess, the hysterical morons around these parts probably grabbed anything and everything they could get their grubby little hands on the moment they heard there was an emergency.

Come to think of it, I wonder if the zombies Otoha disposed of were those very same opportunistic fellas. Maybe poetic justice is real, after all.

"I get that stocking up on food is crucial to our survival and all, but don't you think this is getting a little out of hand?"

We'd been doing nothing but looting every single store within reasonable walking distance for the past week, and every last one of them had been picked clean. Still, after scraping together what was left over, we now had enough food to last us about six months.

I failed to see why we had to keep putting our lives on the line day in and day out. Canned food wasn't going to magically expire within the next week, zombies had no use for it, and we were the only two people who still had a grip on our humanity, as far as I was concerned.

"What's the big rush?"

"Riddle me this." She turned her chair to face me. "What's the scariest thing about a post-apocalyptic zombie wasteland?"

Professor Otoha strikes again.

Snide remarks aside, I was by no means an expert on zombies. Sometimes I had trouble understanding her actions, but she'd been more than willing to provide insight into her thought process. She was damn good at explaining things and incredibly patient with me, but most importantly,

she had fun doing it. Seeing her like that infected me with the same excitement.

"Is that even a question? The zombies, of course."

"Bzzt. That's incorrect," she said, dramatically pointing my way.

"Okay, well, what is it then?"

"Human nature."

"How? Oh... right."

I didn't know all that much about zombie movies, but I'd seen too many FPS teams collapse because of some petty drama that didn't really matter.

The reason I vastly preferred solo play had little to do with the bullying I experienced in high school, although that definitely played a part. It had more to do with how insanely insufferable people could be sometimes, both online and offline.

Now, picture those same insufferable bastards but in a post-apocalyptic setting without any social mores, or laws for that matter, to keep their stupidity in check. They were already bad enough as it was.

"Extreme circumstances bring out the absolute worst in people. Most zombie movies end on a 'Humans were the real monsters all along!' note for this exact reason."

"You have a point there."

"Large populations also mean more zombies on average. Add those two together and you can probably see why our goal of retreating to the countryside is a good long-term solution." She paused for dramatic effect. "But we'll have to transition into a fully self-sufficient lifestyle, and we'll need all the emergency reserves we can get to help tide us over as we're learning the ropes."

Finding the ideal fishing and hunting spots would be a real drag, not to mention how long it'd take for us to master either one of those activities. Figuring out how to work the land was going to be a real doozy too. I could definitely understand where she was coming from.

"Fair enough. How are we going to move all this stuff, though?" A heavy-duty shopping cart was the best we had, and it couldn't even fit everything. Plus, I could imagine how "fun" it'd be to push that thing uphill and over difficult terrain for long distances. Made me shudder just thinking about it.

"Astute observation," she said without a hint of sarcasm. "And what's the silver bullet that'll solve all our problems?"

"Only the greatest invention in all of human history: the automobile! Ideally one capable of driving on rough surfaces, with plenty of storage space, and that can take a serious beating."

"Ding-ding. Correctamundo! That's precisely why scoring a set of wheels is up next on our to-do list, right after we've finished gathering a sufficient amount of supplies."

"I say we nab one off the side of the ro—"

"Yeah, no."

"Hear me out. We hot-wire the car and then—"

"Been there, done that." She shrugged.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Back when we first bumped heads, she was looking to procure herself a piece from the local police station of all places, breaking multiple laws in the process. Otoha's moral flexibility wasn't anything new.

"The car alarm went off, and the doors locked up. It was a real spectacle."

"Shoot."

Cars nowadays had really elaborate security systems, and they couldn't easily be bypassed by the average person.

"We could try looking for one with the key in the ignition. No, wait..."

You'd be hard-pressed to come across a car that only used keys in this day and age. Many of them only started up if the key fob was in the vehicle, which complicated matters.

"Vintage models are still on the table, if that counts for something." Honestly, I was thinking more along the lines of a minibus, a truck, or a van. Anything but some broken-down jalopy.

"Are you gonna be manning the wheel? 'Cause I sure don't have a license."

"Neither do I," she said flatly.

"Then our car's gonna get seized."

"By...?"

"What do you mean? The... Uh, didn't we have this exact conversation before?"

The societal order we once knew and loved was now but a distant memory.

"What matters isn't the license itself but the driving experience that comes with it, and I personally have none. As we all know, inexperienced drivers have a tendency to crash their cars and get surrounded by zombies. I guess you could call it a staple."

"Good to know."

Experience is invaluable, I guess.

"Do *you* have any driving experience, Hiroaki?"

"We're about the same age, my dude. Even if I *had* hypothetically seen people driving or something, there's a difference between firsthand and secondhand experience. The former means something and the latter does no—"

That was when it hit me.

Wouldn't that same sentiment run contrary to my own personal experience? I wasn't the cleanest of shots in any sense of the word, but the first shot I'd ever taken had saved my companion from certain death. It could've very well been beginner's luck, but I felt like there was something more to it than that.

"Actually, I might just be up to the task."

"Wait, really?" It seemed like she was more surprised than I was.

"I've been behind the wheel of a Humvee on more than a few driving missions. I can handle it, no sweat."

"Hum-what?" She tilted her head.

"It's this, um, how do I put it? Big-ass military vehicle."

The High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, or Humvee for short, was a staple FPS vehicle. You'd see it in pretty much any shooter with a modern-day setting, and some of them took the time and effort to simulate how it'd feel to operate the real deal. Your brain just filled in the gaps after that.

"Anyway, if we *do* come across some ol' clunker one day, how 'bout we take it for a spin?"

"Sounds like a plan."

So... Human nature, huh?

I could get behind that idea, but if what she said was true, then why had she decided to take me in? Sure, I'm the one who'd begged to tag along, but if other human beings really were that untrustworthy, then she should've left me behind.

Was it because she thought I'd make a good pack mule? Or maybe, just maybe there was something more to it...

Another one of those tropes, I wonder?

I let my body go on autopilot as I sank deep into thought.



A little before our usual bedtime, Otoha handed me my smartphone.

"It's done charging."

You might be wondering what use a phone could be to a dyed-in-the-wool NEET. Well, sorry to disappoint, but my folks bought it for me back when I started high school, and I'd held on to it ever since. That's all there was to it.

By that point, my life had been entirely consumed by FPS games. Every day, as soon as school ended, I'd swiftly dart out of the classroom before anyone got the chance to pester me with their normie trifles and scamper all the way back home, where FPS-induced bliss awaited me. The phone saw little use, and my laughable contacts list reflected that.

"Never thought I'd be happy to see you again, little buddy."

I had it switched off ever since the incident at the police station, and I'd completely forgotten about its existence—that is, until yesterday, when an ingenious idea occurred to me. I'd tried switching it on, only to be greeted by 1% battery... Damned self-discharge phenomenon.

"Here goes nothing," I said, holding down the power button.

The goal was to gather as much info from the internet as possible. Retreating into the countryside was a brilliant suggestion on Otoha's part, but it was far too abstract for my liking. We had to delve into the nitty-gritty of the operation or risk hitting an unexpected roadblock further down the line.

Narrowing down the destination was our top priority, followed by figuring out the best way to get there. We could even try looking to see if there were any large-scale apocalypse survivor groups or something. Didn't want to get my hopes up too high, but it was at least worth a shot.

"No texts, no missed calls... nothing. What else is new?"

By "laughable contacts list," I meant that my address book only had about ten names in it, including family members. The liveliest aspect of my social life was the constant stream of fan mail I'd been receiving from a sudden influx of spam bots. If I had to guess, one of the many FPS games I'd signed up for was probably hit by a data breach.

Speaking of bots...

I was suddenly reminded of a certain AI assistant: Raven from *Field Battle*.

At the time, I had no idea what she could've possibly meant by "best of luck" or why she knew my real name, but looking back on it, it was almost as if she knew it would be the last time I ever logged off.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. That tinfoil hat's getting a little bit too close to your head there, buddy. Raven's just another AI. Granted, she's pretty advanced—as in "routinely tricking people into believing she's a real living human being" advanced. But why would an actual human keep up the act way after the apocalypse? It doesn't add up.

"Actually..."

If her life-sized figurine was anything to go off of, Raven was definitely a well-beloved character. The game even offered players a Raven-themed cosmetic set. Combine that with a character customization system as fleshed out as *Field Battle's*, and you could probably see how some really original boneheads came up with the hilarious idea of turning their toons into Raven clones. In conclusion, there was a very real possibility that I had been talking to a living, breathing person and not an AI.

There was only one crack in that theory: only one person in the game knew me by my real name.

"You holdin' up okay, bud?" I wondered aloud.

My *Field Battle* buddies and I had an unspoken agreement not to probe into one another's personal lives, and we'd always stuck to it. Well, until this one guy Zino and I had to exchange our addresses over e-mail.

We never met up in person, and each of us had no idea what the other guy looked like, but something just clicked between us. His gaming skills were superb, he was a high-ranking player like yours truly, and our playstyles complemented one another beautifully.

Zino wasn't much of a talker, but that was only because he wanted to "get in character," so to speak. He was so hellbent on staying in character that he wouldn't even break it when we were waiting around in the queue. This quirk of his really appealed to me on a deeply personal level.

"'Bud'? Who are you talking about?" Naturally, Otoha's sharp ears didn't let that one slip past her.

"Just a buddy of mine. A real bro who always had my back. You think he's hanging in there somewhere?"

"Sure..." She was side-eyeing me with her head tilted to the side, which made her stare feel oddly interrogating. "Weren't you supposed to be gathering intel?"

"Got lost in my own head, my bad. I'll get right to it."

Since there was no one left to do server maintenance, the internet could be cut off at any moment. I had to act fast... but there was just one tiny problem.

"Lemme have a look." She put her head on my shoulder.

'Scuse me, miss, don't mean to be rude, but there's this thing called personal space! If the hairs brushing against my cheek are any indication, you're violating mine! And why're you draping your arms around me, too?!

What exactly set off Otoha's sense of shame was about as much a mystery to me as anyone else.

"Your inbox is empty."

"I know."

"Why do I get the feeling you have no friends?"

"Because I don't."

"That makes two of us." There was a hint of childish glee in her voice; she seemed very tickled by this.

Otoha was pretty high up on the misfit totem pole because of the niche nature of her obsession. Honestly, I would've been more surprised if someone who spent their free time roaming the sewers *wasn't* ostracized by their classmates. In that sense, we were practically kindred spirits.

"That it does." I fired up the default web browser.

"Now's not the time for games."

"I just had this set as my homepage, chill."

The homepage in question was *Field Battle's* official website. It felt oddly nostalgic to see it again after what felt like months, or even years, even though only a week had passed. Pre-apocalypse me was no more, but I would always have a soft spot for those halcyon days.

"Also, you *do* know that smartphones can't run VRFPS ga—"

I suddenly noticed something in the bottom right corner.

"What the...?"

A notification window that looked like a manga speech bubble had popped up. The little caricature of Raven attached to it looked as enthusiastic as ever, but that was beside the point. The notification itself was what had blown me away.

"Zino?!" I could feel my voice crack as I yelled out his name.

Field Battle automatically notified users whenever their mutuals were last online.

"Last online... yesterday?!"

"Who's this Xeno? Is he xenophobic or something?"

"Tone down the false accusations, will ya?" I took a deep breath before carrying on. "It starts with a Z. Z-i-n-o. That's my buddy's handle. He originally wanted to go with Gino, but it was apparently taken."

I could still remember him regaling me with the whole nickname origin story. No idea why anyone would want to go with such a generic username, but I had no room to judge.

"He's not Italian, by the way. He lives in a town not too far from here."

"What kind of a person is he?" Otoha seemed genuinely curious.

"He's polite, good at the game... oh, and he comes from a rich family. Apparently, his dad owns a trading company and is really into hunting and —"

At that moment, something else dawned on me.

"Otoha, we have to check up on him."

"Why?" I could almost see the question marks flying out of her head.

"He was online yesterday, meaning there's a good chance he's still alive. His dad must've owned a high-quality hunting rifle, and maybe, just maybe, he had an off-road vehicle we could use."

"I'm not versed in games without zombies, but isn't it possible that his account logged on by itself?"

Imagine being this single-mindedly dedicated to one thing and one thing only. Pathetic. Actually, wasn't the newest entry in the Resident Evil franchise supposed to be a VRFPS? Oh, uh, ahem.

"It's not totally inconceivable, but it's impossible to log in without all the VR gear physically present on the platform."

This measure helped reduce the amount of bots, though there were some basic workarounds; for example, some joker could chuck all his gear onto the platform and then let chaos unfold, but it still required him to own the equipment. I couldn't even begin to imagine why anyone would bother going through all that effort to mess with me during a zombie apocalypse, though.

"Hmm." Otoha hummed to herself as though intensely dissecting the information. "That's all the firepower we need." She pointed to my trusty SAKURA.

"I'm thinking long-term here. This thing is only good for another four shots, and its utility is fairly limited. If we had a hunting rifle, we could snipe zombies from a distance, use it for hunting, and do all kinds of other stuff."

The SAKURA was the perfect backup gun. It was incredibly compact, which meant carrying it didn't really hinder the user in any way. It was also a double-action revolver, so the user could fire off multiple shots without having to manually cock the hammer back each time. And unlike a pistol, it pretty much never jammed.

Yeah, the SAKURA was practically the ideal firearm... if you ignored the measly five-round clip size, the fact that it was snub-nosed and therefore

imprecise, and the .38 special caliber cartridges, which massively lacked in stopping power.

America colonized the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, but the Moro people didn't take too kindly to their new overlords and rebelled. Juramentados continued to charge American soldiers even after being shot. As a result, the Americans elected to phase out .38 caliber revolvers in favor of .45 Colts, which were still widely used to this day. Any gun enthusiast worth their salt should have been familiar with this little slice of history.

Word on the street was that the American army's failure had nothing to do with the .38 special, but that it was a result of soldiers missing most of their shots out of fear of the Juramentados' relentless fervor... Anyway, back to the topic at hand.

The only way to end a zombie for good was by destroying their central nervous system. When it came to humans, you could aim for a triangle around the chest area. Even if you were off the mark, there was a chance your victim would freeze up in pain or possibly even give in to it. Zombies were a different beast altogether.

To bring it full circle, a longer barrel and better cartridges meant we'd have a much easier time dealing with zombies.

"What if it's not there anymore?"

"What have we got to lose?"

"Have it your way, then." Immediately, she began walking away.

"Otoha?" I hurriedly followed after her. "Otoha, did I say something wrong?"

She pulled out a road map from one of the drawers in the staff room.

"Could you point out his location?"

This was the kind of map you'd normally find stashed deep in some guy's glove box, but it made sense for one to be here, considering the hardware store had once provided home delivery services.

"I think it's this mansion right here, if I remember correctly." I pointed to a massive house surrounded by acres upon acres of private land. Zino's family wasn't just well off—they were filthy, stinkin' rich.

"Are you sure?" she asked, casting a sidelong glance at me.

"Well, I've never been to his place."

"Really now?"

"Look, we've never met face-to-face, but that's how most online friendships work. People generally like to remain anonymous."

The anonymity was what allowed us to reveal our true colors and develop meaningful friendships that weren't predicated on lies and social trickery.

"Zino agreed to send me his SR-25 as a sort of hand-me-down through the mail one time. That was the first and last time we ever had any sort of interaction outside the game."

His name was also written on the package: Shouji Kosahana, I think. Not that it mattered; Shouji was and always would be Zino in my heart.

"Are you really friends?"

"Again, we've never met in real life, but we've fought side by side a thousand times over."

"Is he good?"

"Best sniper in the biz. God knows he's saved my precious behind on more than one occasion." I punched in his address and switched to street view mode.

"There, you can't miss it."

On the very outskirts of a wholesome suburban area stood a Western-style mansion too large to fit on a tiny phone screen. Even at a distance, it looked disproportionately large due to the hilly terrain. The pearly white outer fence and ornate front gate screamed bourgeoisie.

"They've got cars out the wazoo."

"They sure do."

There were multiple luxury-brand SUVs parked in the yard. We had no way of telling whether or not they were still out there, or even if the mansion itself was still in one piece, because the phone was just showing us a bunch of pre-apocalypse images seamlessly spliced together to recreate the illusion of a 360-degree view.

"Otoha, it'd mean the world to me. Please, just this once."

There's no way begging will work, but I've gotta try.

"Sure. Let's go."

Well, that was easy. Almost too easy...

"Wish it was a little more run-down, though."

"Please elaborate."

"Snooping around in a decrepit mansion is a classic zombie game staple."

"Mind being more specific?"

"Think Resident Evil."

"A'ight."

Isn't "clueless teenagers wander around an abandoned mansion only to get separated and die off one by one" a well-known horror trope too? Eh, finally got her to go along with this, so I might as well take the plunge.



We weren't going to be able to use the sewer tunnels this time around. Zino lived in another town, and since each city's sewer system was managed separately, they probably didn't intersect. Even if they did, Otoha hadn't mapped that far, so we ran the risk of getting lost. The actual distance we'd have to trek wasn't looking all that appealing either.

Taking all this into consideration, we decided to head there on some BMX bikes we'd found at the hardware store.

It goes without saying, but we couldn't pedal anywhere near the speed of a car, and there was the ever-present danger that we'd lose our balance and go toppling off our bikes. Still, this was undeniably a preferable alternative to walking, and we could easily steer around stray groups of

zombies wandering the streets; in fact, we did it twice over the course of our journey.

Our only other option would've been driving past them, which was clearly out of the question. Bicycles didn't exactly provide a whole lot of protection, nor were they built for ramming into things, so I'd say we made the right call.

After what felt like forever, we finally made it.

"Hey, Hiroaki."

"Yeah?"

"Is this real life?"

"I don't know, is it?"

Before our eyes was a cartoonishly large, two-story mansion surrounded by a lush natural garden and a needlessly tall fence.

Add some fortifications, sprinkle in a few towers here and there, and it would look like a castle straight out of a Disney movie.

For a moment, I imagined how cool it would be if a tactical shooter had this exact same mansion as a playable stage.

Man, I'd be all over that!

"One, two, three, four, five... You know what, let's just leave it at five."

"Come on, Otoha. You can do better than that." We hopped off our bikes and pressed ourselves up against a nearby house.

There were a *lot* of zombies. A horde, maybe... No, a throng! Way more than five, in any case. Was this their twisted idea of a neighborhood party? 'Cause it sure seemed like it.

"You sure this is the place?"

"Sure as can be."

While the outer fence was still hanging in there, the gate was in shambles and the once-pristine, white walls were now smeared with dried-up, blackish blood.

"Umm, is that your friend over there?" Otoha pointed at a zombie clutching some sort of cylindrical object.

Judging by the front sight and the long, thin barrel, it could only have been a rifle—most likely a hunting rifle. Normally, I would've really gobbled up the specs, but to be entirely honest, I wasn't all that knowledgeable about guns that weren't used in FPS games.

"I hope not."

The zombie resembled a middle-aged man, but I had no idea whether it had once been the Zino I'd come to know and love.

"Here's how this goes," Otoha said, tightening her grip on the shovel.

"We either turn back, or—"

"Gragghh!"

A mangled corpse which had once been a little girl suddenly poked its head out of the smashed window right beside us.

At that moment, Otoha's ungodly reflexes kicked in and she chopped the girl's misshapen head clean off in one fell swoop.

I doff my proverbial cap to you, fair lady.

There was just one teeny, tiny problem.

"Oh fu—"

The word that left my lips was drowned out by the sound of the girl's decapitated body falling down onto the scattered shards of glass at our feet.

Unfortunately, however, the resulting noise was just loud enough to draw the zombies' attention.

"Sorry 'bout blowing our cover," Otoha said sheepishly.

"Don't sweat it. We can always make our way back." I turned to see a group of zombies that had materialized behind us. "Of cooourse, who'da thunk?"

We had to move. Now.

"Got any bright ideas?"

"Think, brain, think!" I carefully weighed our options. "Head for the mansion."

"But there aren't as many—"

"Just do it!"

There were considerably fewer zombies behind us, but they were densely packed in a tight space; meanwhile, the significantly larger group of zombies ahead of us was spread out across a large area, meaning we could weave between them.

"We got this, you hear?" I took out my crowbar.

"Loud and clear."

With a quick nod, we rushed headlong into the belly of the beast.



Throw a guy down and you earn yourself a fancy-looking black belt in martial arts. Apply this to what I like to call the "zombie arts" (work in progress) and I think you'd find that Otoha and I were very much deserving of one for having survived for more than a week.

Actually, pretend I never said that. Let's just say that I was now feeling more confident in calling the shots.

Call it a gut feeling, but I just knew from the plethora of relevant variables I'd crunched within seconds right here—imagine me lightly tapping my temple—that this was the best shot we had at making it out unscathed.

And wouldn't you know it, we deftly weaved our way through their ranks, smacking aside any zombie foolhardy enough to step within range of our melee weapons. In a flash, we'd made it to the other side of the fence without a single zombie laying so much as a rotten finger on us.

We put down five of the things, but we didn't have the time or patience to dispose of them properly.

Luckily for us, the gate had been busted wide open... But that was where our luck ran out.

"C'mon baby, Papa needs a new pair of shoes." I gently wriggled the handle on one of the mansion's doors. "Great, this one's locked too."

"Try that one," Otoha said, trying to fend off the swarm of zombies hot on our tail.

The SUVs were still nowhere to be seen, but the door she was referring to was the last entry point I hadn't checked. There was still hope.

"Door, now!"

"Right. On it!"

I was running around trying to find a way in, and Otoha was holding the zombies back for as long as she could. Divvying up these tasks had just sorta happened without us saying a word about it.

"Locked."

"I can't hold them back much longer."

A stream of zombies just kept flooding in through the front gate without any signs of stopping. It was only a matter of time before we were cornered.

"It's always the sentimental ones who get themselves killed. Shoulda known better."

"Oh, so you're blaming me now?! Real cool, Otoha, real cool!" In my frustration, I tried kicking the door open, but it was no use.

Yeah, okay, I'm the one who got us into this mess! But all I wanted was to check up on a friend. Am I supposed to feel sorry about that? Am I supposed to get down on my knees and beg for forgiveness? Because rest assured, I'm not gonna—

"I'll handle this," she said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Just, for the love of God, promise me you won't do anything stupid."

"Watch me." She took out a golf ball, threw it way up in the air, and got into batting stance with her shovel. Then... WHACK! She sent that sucker flying at supersonic speed straight at an unsuspecting zombie's face. It fell on its back with a satisfying *thump*.

"Now that's a home run if I've ever seen one."

"You really *knocked it out* of the park there." *Good one, me.* "Oh wait, my bad, it seems to be getting back up on its feet. Dang, it's almost like this 'plan' was doomed to fail from the very get-go!"

"But it worked in the movies..."

"Are you trying my patience?"

"The only thing I'm trying is to figure out an escape route."

"Good luck with that."

We stood by the door, surrounded by zombies on all sides, and the clock was ticking.

Just as all hope seemed lost, we inexplicably sprouted wings, flew off into the sunset and lived happily ever after... and all that other stuff you'd probably love to see happen.

"All in favor of offing ourselves with our gun, say 'aye,'" Otoha said, slicing off a zombie's head. She then raised her hand. "Aye!"

"Nay!"

The gun had only four shots left. If we wanted to reserve two of those bullets for Otoha's worst-case-scenario idea, then we had only two to defend

ourselves with. I didn't know if I could get us out of this mess, but I wasn't going down without a fight.

"Say hello to my little friend!" Just as I set my sights on a zombie and prepared to pull the trigger, I was pushed to the ground face-first.

"Why, I oughta—" Before I could cuss out my partner, I realized she was standing right beside me.

If she didn't do it, then who the hell did?

"Stay down."

I opened my mouth to say, "Wait, wh—"

BOOOOM!

At that moment, a thunderous roar violated my eardrums.

I watched as the two zombies closest to me got their heads blown to pieces with a nasty squelch. This shooter was packing serious heat; most likely a shotgun.

"Get inside, both of you." The voice came from a maid wielding a Mossberg 500 12 gauge pump-action shotgun.

Hold on, a maid with a shotgun? That door must've hit me at the wrong angle because my deepest, darkest fantasies are coming to life!

"Hiroaki!"

Otoha's voice brought me back to reality, but I was still too weak in the knees to get back up, so I had to crawl through the doorway.

Zombies were getting dangerously close to the door, but the maid popped three of them in quick succession, sending off yet another satisfying domino sequence.

The door closed and multi-locked itself just as one of the zombies lunged our way.

Ouch.

"We're alive? Otoha, we're alive!"

"I wouldn't be so sure." She stared the armed maid down.

Mossberg model 500, the only shotgun to have ever passed the U.S. Army's Mil-Spec 3443E test. She could dispose of us in so many different ways with that baby, it would make your head spin.

Hey, wait a second...

"I take it the death stare is your friend's way of saying thank you?" she asked, sliding the forend back and forth to unload the shotgun.

The woman who'd saved us was roughly 170 cm tall, making her taller than average.

She wore a white, ruffled half-apron draped over a dark blue dress, white dress gloves, and a ruffled headpiece. Her choice of attire simply screamed stereotypical French maid.

And here I was under the impression that maids were in the same vein as elves or dragons. That is to say, purely fictional.

"Erm, yeah, that's exactly it." I nodded meekly.

"I'll buy it... for now." She lowered her weapon.

Early twenties seemed like an appropriate ballpark. She had this intimidating aura about her, unusual for someone her age—oval face, narrowed eyes, and glasses.

Put her in a suit and you'd have one hyper-strict, banging hot secretary who'd single-handedly keep any business afloat. Maybe it's not proper to compare real-life ladies to fictional characters, but something about her reminded me of Raven.



"Don't take this the wrong way, but would I happen to find a bite mark or two if I peeled back all those layers?"

"We're clean." Otoha and I shook our heads in protest.

"And why should I take your word for it? Take off your clothes, right here, right now, and I might be a little more inclined to believe you. Not that anyone's forcing you, of course." She gestured with her shotgun.

"Are you two related, by any chance?" I asked.

"Don't even go there," Otoha growled.

"I was just trying to lighten the mood."

"Enough chitchat. Just get on with it. I want to see you two in your birthday suits... *now*."

"Like, buck naked? You're out of your mind."

There was an entire horde of zombies waiting right outside, practically begging for us to come out. If we were gonna get thrown back out there, I at least wanted to die with some dignity.

"Free yourselves of society's shackles and become one with Mother Nature."

"Now I'm even more convinced. Either way, we're not stripping for your amusement. Do what you will."

"Aw, man. Almost had 'em."

As much as I would've loved to pry, I loved being alive more, so I kept my mouth shut. The way her left eye was twitching told me there was no point in agitating her any further.

Criminally gorgeous yet missing a few screws... Where have I seen that before?

Suddenly, the twitching stopped, and she set down her shotgun. "Please accept my sincerest apologies for my insensitive conduct. Rest assured, it won't happen again." She graced us with a deep bow.

Now that my life wasn't in any immediate danger, I could take a step back and reassess the situation.

The maid's dainty physique didn't exactly scream "cold-blooded killing machine," but looks could be deceiving.

Also, didn't she, like, shoot that thing four times total? That'd be highly unusual in light of Japan's shotgun capacity laws, which only allow for a maximum of up to three shells loaded at any given time—two in the magazine and one in the chamber.

The only feasible explanation was that she must've combat loaded the last shell. For the uninitiated, combat loading was drawing and loading a fresh shell during combat. It was a highly specialized technique, one you'd only expect to see from trained professionals in the field of... battle.

"Zino, you can drop the act. I know it's you."

It wasn't unusual for girls to play as male characters to avoid any unwanted attention from the predominantly male fanbase, so who was I to judge? Zino was Zino, regardless of arbitrary gender distinctions.

How she'd managed to overcome the massive discrepancy between her real self and the character model was beyond me, though. The general consensus was that the resulting motion sickness was too big a handicap for any serious player. Not that I'd tried it myself, of course.

"Pardon?" She tilted her head in confusion.

"It's me. Hound Nine, remember?"

"Hound Nine, now where did I...?" She stopped to think for a moment.

"Oh, I see! Yes, that makes perfect sense. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hound Nine."

I didn't expect her to make the connection so quickly, but I felt relieved we'd finally cleared that up. Now I just had to make sure we were on the same page in terms of formalities.

"Why you gotta do me like this, bro? Stick with Hound Nine from now on, capisce? We're way past the 'Mr.' phase."

Formalities had no place in a fated reunion between two absolute FPS warlords.

"You've got the wrong person, I'm afraid." She let out a long sigh. "This 'Zino' you're referring to is Lady Shino; I'm merely a house maid." She bowed once more. "Tetsuko Uemura, at your service, Mr. Hound Nine."

"Did you just say 'Lady'?"

Like the kind that speaks in a posh, over-the-top accent as her golden curls dangle majestically in the air? No, wait, that's just a comically exaggerated caricature that in no way reflects reality... But then again, maids are apparently still a thing in this day and age, so maybe it's not entirely out of the question?

"You'll be delighted to know that Lady Shino spoke very highly of you, Mr. Hound Nine."

"You don't say..."

Just then, I was struck by a very unpleasant realization. I had gone up to some random maid, an outsider, and told her in no uncertain terms to call me by my FPS handle.

Not sure if she meant it as a passive-aggressive gesture, but "Mr. Hound Nine" sounded awfully condescending. Admittedly, I probably deserved it, but it made me cringe every single time. I was very proud of my roleplay persona, but hearing it uttered from the lips of an outsider felt completely and utterly wrong.

"Come along, now. Milady is expecting you." With that, she turned on her heel and strode off.

Otoha and I exchanged glances before following suit.

"Hiroaki," she said, leaning toward me with a sincere expression.

"Should I call you 'Mr. Hound Nine' from now on?"

"Oh, give me a break."



We stopped by a plain white door at the end of a lengthy hallway. No nameplate, no decoration, nothing. Yep, just your average door.

The huge spaces between the doors, though, not so much. In fact, they were anything but average. I could tell we were going to be in for a real treat.

"And here we are. Any questions?"

"Plenty, actually."

"Wonderful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to." Ignoring me, the maid bowed and walked away, leaving us all by ourselves.

Otoha coughed. "So, uh, should we let ourselves in, or...?"

"I think so?"

We just stared at the door for a while, feeling uneasy.

Didn't mansions typically come with a guest room or two? Couldn't we just have, oh, I dunno, used one of those? I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I sensed there was something fishy going on.

Finally, Otoha broke the silence. "We only have one shot at this. I go right and you go left." She leaned against the door and readied her shovel.

"Care to explain?"

"Rule number one: never trust anybody, especially shady characters like that maid."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We're walking into a trap—and it's hardly original," she said, sounding confident.

"Now why would she do something like that?"

The only one who could've laid a trap for us was Tetsuko, but she probably had neither the time nor the motive to do anything of the sort. At the same time, it was kinda suspicious that she'd taken us directly to her mistress' room.

"Look, zombies are human, but they also aren't."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

If I didn't recognize them as "human," there'd be no moral dilemma in offing zombies. I knew firsthand that this wasn't the case.

"Would you have the guts to kill a loved one if they went zombie?"

"I, umm..."

"You wouldn't. Humans are innately irrational; they'll cling to their precious little memories even if they have to defile them."

"Humans, am I right?" I rolled my eyes for comedic effect.

"That's why they're willing to lock away their loved ones and pretend everything's just the way it was. It's a trope, especially in long-running TV shows."

"You're jumping to conclusions."

Could I honestly say there was no way the maid was about to feed us to her zombie mistress locked away behind this very door? No, of course not, but you could make that same argument for just about anything. Being skeptical of others' intentions was one thing; assuming they had ill intentions was another.

"If something *can* go wrong, it's best to assume that it will."

"I'm not okay with this."

"Fine by me." With a shrug, she reached for the doorknob.

Otoha was going to stick to her guns no matter what, and Tetsuko wasn't exactly the sanest-looking person I'd ever met. Otoha was just as kooky, if not even more so, but she wore it on her sleeve. Tetsuko was her polar opposite in that regard. In other words, the maid couldn't be trusted.

"Okay, fine, but I go first."

"Now, hold on a second—"

"I. Go. First."

The last thing I wanted was a repeat of what happened back at the police station.

"Sure. Knock yourself out."

"On three. One... Two... Three!"

I unholstered my trusty SAKURA and flung the door open.

The room we'd entered was absurdly spacious, easily over three times the size of my bedroom. Well, the kicker was that it was only one of two rooms, sectioned off by a sliding door.

Surprisingly, the interior wasn't anywhere near as ornate as the exterior. Here I'd been expecting lavish, baroque-style, antique furniture and whatnot but was faced with the exact opposite.

The furniture was sleek and geometric, the color scheme monochromatic. Textbook minimalist design.

There was just one piece of furniture in particular that stuck out like a sore thumb: the canopy bed. Yes, its design did adhere to the minimalist theme, but come on, canopy beds are something you'd normally see in a kids' movie about princesses.

Kinda surreal, but appropriate considering she's a modern-day noble, I guess.

I walked up to the bed and pulled back the curtain.

"Zino... is that really you?"

And there she was, the prettiest thing on the planet, sleeping like a baby.

Her long, flowing, flaxen hair and her well-defined facial features were dead giveaways that she was of European stock. That combined with her refined sleeping posture gave her a Sleeping Beauty vibe. Clearly she'd had a good upbringing.



To think that this was the same Zino I'd been buddies with all these years... It was genuinely mind-blowing. This girl was, hands down, the best sniper I'd ever played with. Nobody else even came close.

And they say girls are bad at video games? Pff, yeah right!

In retrospect, there were some telltale signs I should've picked up on—namely, Zino's unusual body proportions and refined mannerisms.

It should come as no surprise that most players generally sought out FPS games as a way of living out their power fantasies. Everyone and their mother made themselves into big, beefy giants and acted the part, and by that I meant they were toxic. Like, really toxic.

Zino was the exception. Her character's model was ungodly thin and... well, tiny. Zino was soft-spoken and incredibly polite to anyone who crossed "his" path. Not that all men were childish and immature, but Zino was kind of a rarity in the FPS world.

Okay, then. What now?

She was out cold.

Is this the sleepy-time kinda cold or dead-body kind? Uh, what if Otoha was right all along?

"Work with me here." I leaned in right next to her and brought out my free hand, placing it just in front of her nose and mouth.

A few seconds passed by, and I felt nothing.

She wasn't breathing.

"No way..." I retracted my hand.

I should've checked for a pulse, but I was too afraid of the answer. Well, that and the fact that touching a girl this unthinkably beautiful felt almost sinful somehow.

"Hmm?" Abruptly, her jade-green eyes popped wide open and stared straight into the deepest recesses of my soul.

"Huh?" My mind went blank.

I had seen lumbering corpses do things that made my stomach churn, yet *this* is what got to me. I couldn't even explain why.

"G-Get away from me!"

She was just within arm's reach. If she lunged at me, I was toast.

"Hiroaki!" Otoha ran up behind me and wound up her shovel with an audible *whoosh*. "Mo—"

Thwump!

"Otoha?" I whipped around and saw Tetsuko sliding across the floor with one of her legs stretched out.

She'd been watching us this whole time.

I should've known better than to doubt Otoha's intuition! This is all my fault. I need to act fast. Think, dammit, think!

"Yoo-hoo!"

"I'm... I'm so sorry, Otoha."

"If you could just settle dow—"

"Can't you see I'm having a moment here?!" But that was when I realized I wasn't speaking to Otoha or Tetsuko, which only meant one thing. "Gah! Are you some new breed we didn't know about?!" I cried, turning to face the bed once more.

"Pardon?"

Wait, isn't that basically what Otoha said to me back in the police station? And I was clearly not a talking corpse! Whoopsie, I think I might've overreacted a little.

"So you're not a zombie?"

"I don't believe so, no." Her radiant smile was like a ray of warm sunshine on a cold winter day.

To be honest, I never really understood what that expression was supposed to mean. I always figured a single ray of sunshine wouldn't save someone from freezing to death. But boy, how wrong I was. The ray was the light at the end of the tunnel, the hope for a better tomorrow, and the sign that all our suffering was coming to an end. This symbol of hope could get us through the darkest periods of our lives. Her smile nourished my soul and made me whole again. I would've done anything to protect it.

Okay, enough about that. Man, I almost just lost my marbles for real. Back to the matter at hand.

"Explain to me how you weren't breathing a few seconds ago, then."

"I was holding my breath."

"And why would you do such a thing?"

"I was expecting a kiss."

"O...kay?"

"You really shouldn't keep a lady waiting like that. I was about to pass out, you know."

"Duly noted."

What the hell is that about?!

"That reminds me." She lifted a single, delicate finger. "There's this theory that Sleeping Beauty's handsome prince was actually a necrophiliac."

"Stop."

"Think about it. She was asleep for hundreds of years. Most people don't live past ninety."

"La-la-la, I can't hear you!"

"That's when I had the brilliant idea of pretending to be dead! Just in case you had similar inclinations."

"Who do you take me for?!" I shouted back.

Is that really your impression of me after all these years?!

"No need to get all defensive. I just didn't want to upset you, Hound Nine."

"Uh, and what about me?" Otoha asked as Tetsuko helped her up.

"Yes, Otoha, we all know how much you love your zombies. Now would you please quit butting into the conversation?! As I was saying... Actually, hold that thought. What did you just call me?"

"Hound Nine. Is something wrong?"

"You're Zino, aren't ya?"

"My, I thought we'd already established that," my long-lost brother-in-arms said with a smile.



"I guess I'll get the ball rolling. My name's Shino Kosahana, and I'm delighted to have you here, Hound Nine."

Seeing as our "fated reunion" was a complete trainwreck, we all agreed a do-over was in order. We pulled up two fancy bar stools that'd been leaning against a wall, sat ourselves down, and went through the motions.

Tetsuko, who was now standing menacingly beside us, had been kind enough to make us all some black tea. At first, we'd thought it might be poisoned, but Zino—err, Shino—drank it up like it was nothing. Who knows, maybe the cups themselves were poisoned like in some detective novel. Then again, maybe going down that rabbit hole wasn't such a good idea.

"Not this again." I buried my face in my hands. "Okay, look, I know you know my real name, so let's stick with that, alright?"

"That reminds me: remember how ecstatic you were about getting that SR-25?"

The SR-25 was my go-to controller in the pre-SCAR-H era, just so you know.

"Oh yeah, big time. But enough about me. Let's talk about you, Shino... or should I say Shouji?"

"I, um..."

"Are you hiding something?"

Passing off as male in an online game was one thing, but doing so in real life was another. Something was definitely up.

"I don't want to talk about it." Ashamed, she averted her gaze. Seeing a crack run through her finely crafted social mask felt oddly... real, in a way.

"Did we just open up an old wound?" asked Otoha, befuddled by the whole situation.

"Allow me to shed some light on the matter." Tetsuko decided to speak up in her stead. "As the head of a sizable trading company, Master Shouji had an endless sea of shipping labels printed in his name, some of which were stashed away in this very mansion." She hesitated for a moment. "The young lady made frequent use of them. That's all I'm willing to say."

"Well, I'll be damned..."

That was Tetsuko's way of saying that Shino had misappropriated Daddy's business assets to save herself the hassle of going through proper mailing procedures. Despite knowing that what she was doing was wrong, she'd gone and done it anyway.

For a few seconds, no one said a word.

"Hiroaki it is, then." The perpetrator in question took this opportunity to move us away from the topic.

"Finally, a voice of reason around here."

"Now *you* say it."

"Say what?"

"My name. Remember, no take-backsies."

Shino had a wholesome, laid-back vibe about her that was hard to put into words. It made me feel like I was getting worked up for no reason when everything was all hunky-dory.

Man, that premium upbringing really did wonders for bolstering her resilience... or maybe she was just born that way? Actually, yeah, it's the latter, no doubt about it. I know an oddball when I see one.

"So, uh, Shi... Err, Shin—aww, just forget it." I thought I could muscle my way through it, but jumping straight to a first-name basis with a girl I'd just met was far too embarrassing.

"Huh. I see how it is." Otoha's glare penetrated the very essence of my soul.

Come to think of it, I never really had this issue with Otoha, and she's a girl. Technically speaking, anyway. Oops, okay, that sounded really wrong. It's not that I don't think of her as a girl, but... Man, here I am digging my own grave again. She's absorbed in her own little world where nothing matters except zombies, so how am I supposed to—

"Ah, geez," I said. "You know what? Fine, I'm *sorry*. Happy now?"

Otoha just continued staring at me with the eyes of a dead fish.

"Any time now," Kosahana said.

"Look, I love ya and all, but—"

"Why don't you prove it, then? I'll wait." She blinked a few times and pouted adorably.

Something about seeing her gorgeous lips pushed out in this cute, childlike expression drove me up a wall. Pardon the vulgarity, but it *really* tickled my fancy.

"Err, well, let's get to know each other first, alright?" My heart was thumping wildly, making it hard for me to concentrate on the whole talking thing.

She gaped at me in utter disbelief. "Have you forgotten all those sleepless nights we spent together?"

"We pulled an all-nighter once or twice, so what?"

In my defense, I didn't even know you were a girl back then!

Kosahana suddenly turned to face Tetsuko. "Say, is there something wrong with him or is it just me?"

"Without a shadow of a doubt, milady."

"He didn't even kiss me back there! The nerve of this man! Unbelievable."

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

"Just yesterday, I took the most important bath in my life. I even shaved all the places that count with great care. All for what? *This* pathetic display?"

"Did you remember the other thing we talked about, milady?"

"Do you mean the lingerie you were nagging me about? I have it on right now, actually."

"Excellent." At that moment, they both looked at me as though gauging my reaction.

"What?"

"See? He's still sticking to his guns. You'd think he'd want to stick them somewhere else."

"Spineless is what he is. Any self-respecting virile male would've pounced on you like a ferocious lion after a frail gazelle, milady."

"I'm still here, remember?"

Yikes, talk about sexism.

"I believe Mr. Hound Nine has what you'd call a 'faulty member,' milady."

"He... what?"

"Put simply, he can't keep it up."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" I had just about had it with these two!

Also, I knew it! I knew "Mr. Hound Nine" was her way of messing with me!

"Mind your manners, Hiroaki. We're civilized human beings here, not wild animals," Kosahana said sharply. "Just so you know, I don't care if your member is faulty. I don't even care if you have necrophilic tendencies. I'll always love you for who you are."

"Gee, thanks. Much appreciated."

"His member functions just fine. I've seen it with my own eyes."

"Otoha! You are not helping at all!"

I might've popped a massive one in front of you, but that was an accident, you hear?!

"Tetsuko, thoughts?"

"It would appear men aren't completely devoid of virtue."

"A loyal animal, this one."

"But an animal nonetheless. We just need him to go feral, my lady. How does stripping completely naked sound?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea!" Kosahana took out a notepad from who knows where and started jotting down some notes.

Also, please stop referring to me as an animal. It's awfully degrading.

"Why're you so obsessed with me, anyway? It's not like we have some fond memory from our childhood where we pretended to marry each other under a tree, candy rings and all."

Right?!

They exchanged glances.

"Hiroaki, you came to my rescue when no one else would." Kosahana wiped away a single tear rolling down her cheek. "You traveled far and wide, braving the walker horde, all for little old me. You're my Prince Charming, Hiroaki."

"No, I'm no—"

Being seen in that kind of light was certainly flattering, but I didn't deserve the credit. We came here for purely pragmatic reasons, end of story.

"My heart's been pounding against my chest, begging for release for the longest time now." Kosahana looked me dead in the eyes and asked, "Would you soothe it with your gentle touch?"

"Um, I'll pass, thanks." I rejected her tempting offer because that's what a gentleman would do. Otoha's death stare had absolutely nothing to do with it, I swear.

"Your loss." She pressed her dainty hands to her plump breasts.

Then again... No, now's not the time. Keep your head in the game, Hiroaki. Remember, you didn't come here to get all buddy-buddy with Zino. You came here for a specific, purely selfish purpose. Just get it over with already.

"Actually..." That was when it dawned on me. "You said you took a bath yesterday, correct?"

"Correct. I can go into detail, if you so please?"

"But that doesn't add up. How did you know we'd be coming over?"

She must've known from the very beginning, but how? I hadn't messaged her or anything—which was probably a good idea now that I thought about it, but that was beside the point. There was no way she would've known about our arrival in advance. Something smelled fishy here, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"You're the one who made first contact, Hiroaki dear."

"What are you talking about?"

"You had Raven pass on your message... didn't you?"

As a quick reminder, Raven was *Field Battle's* beloved mascot character and AI assistant.

What you probably didn't know is that players could leave behind voice messages for their buddies, which Raven would pass on the next time they went online.

At this point, it was painfully obvious that Raven was going rogue.

As humanlike as she was, Raven ran on a script. An incredibly complex one, mind you, but a script nonetheless. She wasn't supposed to deviate from it.

Normally, I would've been willing to brush that one weird exchange we had way back when under the rug. Even ironclad scripts are susceptible to a few minor glitches here and there; it wasn't too big of a deal. This, however, was way too sketchy for my liking. Raven wasn't just trying to bring the two of us together; she'd been smart about it too. Without her

informing Kosahana of our arrival, we might've been mistaken for a group of ragtag raiders and shot on sight.

What was her motive?

"Is there something on your mind?" Otoha asked.

"It's nothing." I turned back to Kosahana. "You and I need to have a serious talk."

Raven could wait. Right now, there were more pressing matters to attend to.

"Who's this 'you' person? I don't see a 'you' around here, do any of you?" She looked around the room, feigning confusion.

"Okay, fine. You win... Sh-Shino."

"I'm all ears, Hiroaki dear."

"Remember that time you told me all about your dad and how he was really into hunting?"

"Certainly."

"I was wondering if you'd be willing to part with one of his spare guns and maybe an SUV if you still have one collecting dust somewhere. It'd mean the world to me, Shino."

I may have sounded calm on the outside, but on the inside, I was sweating bullets. My demands would be unreasonable in the best of times. In the middle of a zombie apocalypse, they were downright insane.

What better way to bring out the absolute worst human nature had to offer than threatening someone's limited resources? From their perspective, we weren't just two complete nobodies—we were two *armed* complete nobodies. They couldn't just assume that we'd take no for an answer when we had other, more primitive means of bartering.

I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if they shoved us out the door... or resorted to more drastic measures.

"We're looking to flee into the countryside. It's by far our best shot at survival," Otoha added.

"What makes you say that?" Shino said, taken aback.

"Urban areas boast large population numbers, meaning more zombies—not to mention other potentially dangerous survivors. Once basic utilities such as gas, electricity, and water go out, and they will go out eventually, there'll be literally no reason to stay. I can keep going if you'd like."

"I find her assessment to be most accurate, milady."

"I never got your name. Mind filling me in?" Shino looked completely lost, almost as if she'd forgotten Otoha was sitting right there next to me this entire time.

"It's Judou. Otoha Judou."

"Otoha darling, do tell us all about your relationship with this man right here." She tilted her head in my direction.

"We're thick as thieves. Guess you could say we're partners in crime." She threw a quick glance my way.

The fact that Otoha said it without any hesitation spoke to me on an emotional level. She thought of me as her equal despite the fact that I was dead weight half the time. Okay, most of the time.

"Otoha, I—"

"We're so tight-knit that we've even gone as far as exploring each other's naked bodies, leaving no speck of skin unturned."

"You just couldn't help yourself, could you?"

First of all, we hadn't been completely naked. Secondly, it was purely business, not some horny teenage antics.

"Is that true?" Shino asked in a grave tone.

"She searched me for bite marks once, end of story. If you've got a problem with that, you'll have to take it up with me. I owe Otoha my life. The least I can do is stand by her side like a real partner would."

"As far as I'm concerned, you've already returned the favor."

"Flukes don't count."

"Listen to me, Hiroaki. I'm not gonna let anyone talk smack about my partner, not even you. Got it?"

"Loud and clear, partner."

Otoha was easily the most straightforward person I knew. She said what she meant and she meant what she said. Yet there she was, taking an indirect jab at Shino. Or maybe that was just how my mind chose to perceive it.

I highly doubt it, but hey, it's possible.

"A girl and a boy under one roof, tensions running high, limited recreational activities... Why, you must've engaged in all sorts of deviant activities, ranging from vanilla to... Oh, the humanity!" Shino struck a "woe is me" pose.

"The suspension bridge effect doesn't seem to produce stable long-term relationships—at least, according to the overwhelming body of data. In other words, you still have a fighting chance, milady."

The suspension bridge effect happened when a person crossed a suspension bridge and saw a member of the opposite sex. The fear of falling down caused rapid heartbeats, shallow breathing, and so on, which could easily be attributed to feelings of love. Speaking broadly, it was a physiological response to fear mistaken for arousal.

As if...

"Enough games. Will you help us or not?" Otoha asked, sounding uncharacteristically stern.

"Tone it down a little."

"Take whatever you like... Not that it matters." Shino was now acting all moepy.

"Way to go, dude. Just leave the negotiating to me, okay?" I turned my attention back to Shino.

"You must forgive my tactless associate. She's not very good with people, as you can see, but she does have a point. Our fate is in your hands, Shino. I hope you understand that."

"We'd all benefit from this arrangement if you were to tag along with us. Those who form small, close-knit communities boast the highest rate of survival by a landslide, as is demonstrated in basically any zombie-centered TV show. Birds of a feather either flock together or get picked off one by one, slowly but surely. I believe it's in our mutual interest not to let that happen. Uemura, you're good with guns. Shino and Hiroaki, with a little bit of elbow grease, you two'll get on her level in no time. We can't take on the world by ourselves, but if we work together, we might just be able to. What do you say?"

"Otoha, that's... beautiful."

Otoha was coming around to the idea that even the most exceptional individuals had their limits, whether she was conscious of it or not. At first, she was incredibly reluctant to seek help from others because she thought she could make it all on her own. Then, the "incident" happened, and that belief had been shattered. No wonder she took issue with me framing it as a "fluke"—to her, it was a pivotal moment of inner growth.

After a long silence, Shino said, "We'd be more than happy to provide you with the necessary goods, but I'm afraid we're in no position to aid you in your endeavors."

"But why?"

She was in full agreement with Otoha's assessment of the situation, so that couldn't have been it. Was it possible that she really did believe there was something between me and Otoha? She couldn't have been *that* petty... right?

"You heard the lady," Tetsuko said.

"Shino, talk to me. I'm sure we can work something out."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Shino..." I then noticed that her fists had been clenched this entire time, as though she was keeping herself in check.

There was definitely something on her mind. Something she wasn't willing to share.

Otoha and I just stood there feeling lost and confused, not saying a word.



Walkers made their rounds outside the mansion, attracted to the lingering scent of human flesh—the one thing that spared them the endless monotony of having to repeat the same actions over and over and over. Not that their dead brains cared.

They were all stuck on some sort of loop, whether it involved restocking store shelves, making breakfast out of spoiled produce, wandering the empty streets in search of a loved one, or seeking out the one they had once sworn to protect.

"Shi...no..." A lone walker, dragging its rifle along the ground as it restlessly paced around the mansion, cried out in torment.

The other walkers gathered around the scent of human flesh, but not this one. It had been there from the very beginning.

Even as dusk neared and the lights blinked on, attracting the others like flies to a lantern, this one stood its ground and cried the same name over and over again as though in solemn prayer.

"Shiii...nooo..."

The way it paced around the mansion was reminiscent of a pilgrim in search of a holy site that had never really existed in the first place.



"This shit is straight fire, you feel me?"

The bathroom wasn't just big; it was *crazy* big. If I hadn't known better, I would've confused it with the bathing area in a hot spring resort. It was fitted with natural stone tiles, and it even came with a fountain sculpted in the shape of some weird demonic figure.

To my dismay, the acoustics were so bad I could hear shower noises all the way from the dressing room. Naturally, I overheard Otoha's pitiful attempt at trying to sound hip.

"Quick question," I said.

"Shoot."

"How does one break character this bad?"

Yeah, anyone hearing that awkward line from afar would've probably assumed it was me, the gamer bro of the bunch.

And no, I wasn't in the shower with her. She had told me to stand guard outside the bathroom door, so I did. Well, technically I *sat* guard, but let's not get bogged down with the details.

Wasn't one of my brightest moments, not by a long shot. All I could think about were beads of water rolling all the way down from her supple chest to her other similarly sinful assets.

Brain, why must you be this way?

"I had to."

"Because zombie movies?"

"You know it."

Otoha was making the best of a crummy situation in her own unique, albeit somewhat twisted, way. I had trouble understanding her at times, but if it weren't for her idiosyncratic ways, I wouldn't have made it anywhere near as far as I had.

If only others knew the real Otoha.

Society liked people to think in black and white, but the truth often rested in shades of gray.

Otoha found great joy in the apocalypse, as was evident just now, so it'd only be fair to deem her a bona fide psycho... right?

Well, no, reality was never that simple. Otoha had spent her first few nights alone crying into a helmet, thinking that *she* was the one to blame,

that *she* was the one who had killed her family. She coped the only way she knew how—by indulging in her zombie fantasies even harder than before.

I was ostracized, shamed, and made fun of for my interests in high school, and it had led me down a very similar path. I imagined Shino must've gone through some serious stuff as well.

Humans were multifaceted creatures, carrying with them all sorts of depth and nuance even if they never let it show.

Maybe all we needed was someone who would listen, someone who would accept us, warts and all.

"Mind if I get something off my chest?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"So, you know how people subscribe to the whole 'in a time of test, family is best' mentality, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"I think they're full of shit. I really do. Family doesn't care about the real you; they only care about the you *they* wanna see. I was a failure, a disgrace to the family name, and only *then* was I their son."

"Hiroaki, I—"

"They could rot in hell for all I cared... or so I thought, until, well, *this*. Just thinking about them gets me all gooey inside. It's hard to articulate the feeling."

"I know it all too well. My sister in particular was the worst. She treated me like trash, like I wasn't even human. I wanted to just..." she trailed off.

"Yeah, I wouldn't blame you."



All Otoha wanted was to share the joy of zombie movies with others, but she was too socially awkward to pull it off without sounding crazy. She was met with ridicule and disdain by the ones she had trusted the most: her very own family. They never listened or bothered to understand the real Otoha. Instead, they tried bullying her into being “normal” for her own good, blind to their own ignorance. I could see how she’d abandon them... and maybe even come back later to, y’know, put them out of their misery.

“Sorry, I’m not really used to talking about my feelings.”

“Neither am I.”

“Try setting the mood next time. You caught me off guard.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. It’s just that I’ve had some time to think about... stuff.”

By that I meant how Otoha had recognized me as her partner earlier today. It had made me realize that there were still layers to Otoha I had yet to peel back.

“Same here, actually.”

At that moment, I heard a door pop open right behind me. I turned around and saw Otoha wrapped snugly and deliciously in her bath towel.

I didn’t know if she just didn’t see me that way or if she had no sense of shame, but she just stood there, completely unfazed. I, for one, wasn’t taking it all too well.

“Hiroaki, we need to talk.” Her tone was serious.

“Ah, err, yea, of course. Bring it.”

“Remember that zombie with the rifle outside the mansion?”

“Yeah, what abo—wait, lemme guess. Shino’s dad?”

Zombies only held on to items that had strong emotional associations or that they had just happened to die with. That particular zombie had a rifle. Rifles were an incredibly rare sight in Japan and mostly in the hands of the rich. These wealthy folks typically used their rifles for hunting purposes. They also tended to keep them in a collection inside their mansions. Now, who did we know who was rich, into hunting, and who owned a mansion in this general area?

“I think so, yes.”

“Knew it.”

One point to team me.

“Hiroaki, there’s something you need to know.”

There I was, sitting on the floor and minding my own business, when I felt a soft sensation against my back. It was Otoha’s breasts—you know, just in case you didn’t get the memo.

Let’s hope she put on a bra. If not, I’ll be pushing daisies.

“Otoha, I really need you to—”

“I killed my sister.”

“You what?”

"If you consider killing a zombie to be murder, that is. I took Dad's golf club and went to town on her in a drunken stupor. After that, I turned my attention to Mom, and the rest is history," she said matter-of-factly.

"There's a scene like this in basically every zombie movie under the sun. I had run through every last one of them in my head so many times, bashing their skulls in just felt like going through the motions."

"Wow."

"Maybe it's just because I despised those two, but I can't say I regret anything that went down that day. Not sure what happened to Dad; he wasn't home and I haven't heard from him since." She went silent for a moment before carrying on. "I'd like to think I would've done the same regardless of our relationship. They really didn't like zombies. Trust me, I never heard the end of it."

"Huh."

"As for Dad, I'm kind of undecided. I know I'd rather die at the hands of a loved one than be trapped inside my own corpse. I'm sure he would too. This is going to make me sound incredibly petty, but I really can't bring myself to track him down, and..." She took a deep breath. "It hurts just thinking about it."

"Yeah."

"He's not the person I once knew, and that's a fact. But something inside me refuses to budge. I don't even know anymore."

"The thought of loss is terrifying, it really is. Just look at how hard it is to 'pull the plug' on a dying family member. It's clear what the right choice is; there's no debating that. That doesn't stop us from clinging to hope when there is none. We might think, what if a miracle happens and everything just magically fixes itself? It's stupid, incredibly stupid, but maybe that's what makes us human."

Most people would eventually move on with their lives, but that was beside the point. We would much rather dig our heels in than let go of the people who shaped us into who we were.

"I guess so."

"A bookshelf fell on my mom. I watched as her blood seeped out from underneath it. It was... something else."

"I can imagine."

"Anyway, don't you think this all feels oddly contrived, almost like we're playing out some sorta hackneyed script?" I couldn't take the stuffy atmosphere for much longer, so I tried to lighten the mood. "I mean, what's the deal with zombies? It's almost like they were just made for drama. How convenient."

Not only did they look the same after they became zombies, but they also acted pretty much the same, too. It didn't make things easy in the slightest. I was afraid to think what would've gone down at home had I not lucked out with the bookshelf.

"Shino has it pretty bad."

"She sure does." I let out a deep sigh.



I stepped into the dining hall, grunting like some guy in his forties.

I would've never imagined that something as simple as taking a bath could be so fulfilling—and that's coming from a NEET. It was so good that I even started humming halfway through.

Back in the hardware store, we'd heat up a batch of water using a portable gas stove, soak it up with a towel, and take turns washing ourselves while the other stood guard. It was just to reduce our scents, and it felt awfully mechanical and not relaxing in any way.

"What took you?" Otoha asked with a tinge of irritation in her voice.

"It was just too good."

"I see you've found our bathing facilities to your liking." Tetsuko appeared from the back of the dining hall, wheeling along a stainless steel cart. It was the kind you'd expect to see in a fine dining establishment.

When I think of a maid, this is what comes to mind. Not shotguns, no siree. Anything but shotguns.

"Did I ever!"

"Did we ever," Otoha corrected.

"Splendid. Come along now. Your food is ready." With that, Tetsuko turned on her heel and led us to the table they had prepared for us.

This wasn't just any table, oh no. It was one of those fancy-schmancy tables that could seat dozens of people, although presently there were only ten chairs. A nice white tablecloth had been laid over the top, and an assortment of neatly arranged cutlery adorned each position.

"You'll have to settle for my subpar cooking," she said, unloading the cart. "Our chef... Well, let's just say he's seen *livelier* days."

Holy guacamole.

There was dressed salad, bubbling-hot soup, roast beef with a side of mashed potatoes and some neatly sliced carrots, and a pie-looking thing I figured was probably a quiche.

"Not pulling any punches, are we?" Otoha stared blankly at the food, clearly a little intimidated.

"I was told to 'go all out.'"

"You really shouldn't have..." It felt a tad ticklish being treated as proper guests when we had mostly come here to take what we wanted.

"Is Shino coming?" Otoha asked as she scanned the area.

To absolutely no one's surprise, Otoha, being the shining beacon of sensibility that she was, knew basic dining etiquette. I, on the other hand, had just barely caught myself subconsciously reaching for the fork like some sort of savage.

Shame on you, man.

"Lady Shino's... in her room."

Why the slight pause?

"Is there something we should know?"

"There's a second room adjacent to hers: the *gaming lair*, as it were."

She had her very own dedicated man—err, womancave. That explained why her bedroom was lacking in gaming paraphernalia haphazardly scattered across the room. Wouldn't want to ruin the clean, minimalistic feel.

"I haven't seen her emerge in ages."

"So she's a shut-in?"

"If that is how you wish to put it," Tetsuko said as she poured us water from a bottle.

I could see why she had taken us directly to Shino's room.

"Dig in while it's still hot."

"If you insist." I of all people was in no position to give Shino flak, so I kept my mouth shut. I sliced off a juicy piece of roast beef, and down the hatch it went.

Otoha and I were speechless for a few solid seconds.

"This roast beef right here, it hits different. Right, Otoha?"

"It sure does."

I'd give anything to make this moment of pure bliss last forever.

"Food is best when fresh." Tetsuko was practically glowing with an air of confidence.

Store-bought roast beef had its place, but nothing beat fresh food. It wasn't even a contest. Tastewise, this was up there with a premium cut of steak.

"Finally, some good food." After what had felt like eons of canned food and cup noodles, a real meal was a welcome change of pace.

"I picked up all the ingredients myself."

Huh? Where'd she get a cut of beef like that in this day and age? Unless it's actually zombie meat, but I don't even wanna go down that road.

"I go out shopping somewhere about three times a week," Tetsuko said matter-of-factly. "Cold storage is—well, was—commonly outsourced to third-party logistics companies. Typically, products would stay in refrigerated warehouses before being shipped off to the end users. A good number of them still have access to electricity, thanks to the maintenance work done by walkers who appear to be repeating past behavioral patterns. Regular stores weren't quite as lucky, unfortunately."

Cold storage facilities you'd find in your local supermarket weren't anywhere near as efficient as refrigerated warehouses. The latter could reasonably afford to make the transition into solar energy, the former not so much.

"Did you happen to serve in the JSDF by any chance?"

Tetsuko played it off like it was no big deal, but most people probably wouldn't consider setting out all alone into a zombie-infested wasteland "shopping." Grabbing every can of food in sight was stressful enough, but sorting through everything on the spot wasn't my idea of a good time. Despite that, she deliberately went for only the finest ingredients.

Then there was the combat loading—and with a shotgun at that.

I didn't think the JSDF had ever used shotguns in any official capacity, but there were a select few armies that had—namely, the U.S. Armed Forces. The rationale was that under certain circumstances, shotguns were, in fact, superior to rifles. It was entirely possible that the JSDF had unofficially armed some of its squads with shotguns to test out their viability.

"I've never served a day in my life, but I *did* train under the wing of a former military instructor in order to serve as Lady Shino's personal bodyguard. I'm comfortable with handguns, shotguns, assault rifles... the whole package," she said coolly.

"A little excessive, don't you think?"

Japan was one of the safest places on the planet—before all this zombie stuff happened, anyway. The bar couldn't have possibly been *that* high.

"Due to the size of his trading empire, Master Shouji was forced to do business with all sorts of people. Guerilla movements and criminal organizations included."

"Alrighty then."

So what you're trying to say is that he could've been involved in drug trafficking? Okay, maybe I'm being a little uncharitable. What if he was importing legal goods from, say, a politically unstable region? Of course he'd run into the wrong crowd; it comes with the territory. Doesn't mean he couldn't go about it in an ethical manner. The founder of one really popular sushi chain reformed large swathes of pirates by teaching them how to catch tuna and then buying it from them, so I know it's possible.

"As you may have already noticed, Lady Shino is part European—Italian, to be exact. Her late mother was Sicilian."

"Huh."

"She... How should I put it? She had ties to the Cosa Nostra. Family ties, that is. She managed to break free of their grasp, but not without a massive target on her and her family's back."

I vaguely remembered that Cosa Nostra was the most prominent of the four major organized crime groups in Italy. I was no expert on the matter, but their name had cropped up in pretty much every mafia-related FPS game.

"They even went so far as to try and abduct Lady Shino. On more than one occasion, I might add."

I'd heard horror stories about the atrocities South American drug cartels would commit to uphold their reputations; I imagined the Cosa Nostra was no different. Terrifying stuff, no doubt.

"Master Shouji was a kind man. He took me in and treated me like his own flesh and blood when I had nowhere to turn. Lady Shino needed a capable bodyguard, so I threw my hat in the ring, and the rest is history."

"Must've been rough."

"It's in the past now, for better or for worse." She shrugged.

The pre-apocalyptic world we called home a mere month ago was now but a dying memory.

"At any rate, our affairs are none of your concern. We'll manage, with or without you."

She had a point. The two of us "nobodies" were only managing to live by the skin of our teeth. Tetsuko, on the other hand, had real military training. So long as she didn't go around slaughtering zombies just for the heck of it, they would probably do fairly well for themselves.

"The warehouses'll dry up sooner or later. Then what?" Otoha muttered.

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Tetsuko would follow Shino to the ends of the earth or die trying. The day she abandoned her mistress would be the day she was no longer Tetsuko. If Shino didn't want to leave, Tetsuko didn't want to leave either. It was really that simple.

"There's something more to this, isn't there?"

Tetsuko kept quiet, but Otoha and I could more or less put the pieces together. I considered the rifle-carrying zombie and this massive mansion with only two people living inside it.

I think it's safe to say that—

"Your food's getting cold," Tetsuko said as she plucked an apple off the cart and peeled it clean with a few quick and deliberate knife strokes.

"That'll have to do for dessert. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's a hungry mouth that needs feeding." She then sliced the apple up into bite-sized pieces, lined them up on a plate, and set off to deliver Shino's share of the food.



Tetsuko insisted we stay the night and, since we weren't in a rush, we obliged. After that, she showed us to our respective rooms.

On an unrelated note, not only was the mansion entirely solar-powered, but it also had an emergency generator tucked away in the basement and gasoline reserves for days.

I liked to keep my phone off to save battery, but seeing as the likelihood of a complete power outage was virtually nonexistent, I switched it back on.

It might've been a relic of the past, but the phone still had its uses: namely, the GPS and the internet. I'd be able to use the latter as long as the servers had access to a constant feed of electricity, which an overwhelming majority did.

"It's go time." I got into bed and fired up *Field Battle's* website, which I had set as my homepage.

Raven's little caricature popped up in the corner as usual. I stared at the screen for a little while before finally opening my mouth.

"Raven, what—no. *Who* are you?" I manually activated the site's built-in speech-to-text feature and cut right to the chase.

Balance suggestions, user reports—anything remotely related to the game's well-being went through Raven via voice or text. Chatting capabilities, however, were beyond her programming.

"I'm Raven, G-Wood's head of operations." A series of letters shot across her speech bubble, forming one out of a handful of automated responses.

Raven was indeed part of a private military company, at least according to in-game canon. Her official duties included, but were not limited to, post-game announcements, legal matters, ammo restocking, and bounty notices.

"Don't play games with me. I know you led me here," I said as I watched my words spill onto the screen.

"I don't know what that means." Yet another automated response.

"You tipped Shino off too, didn't you?"

We had rushed over to Shino's place almost immediately after receiving the notification, yet she had known we'd be coming well in advance. It couldn't have been anyone but Raven, the AI that had control over *Field Battle's* various social features... or someone trying to pass themselves off as her. AI technology simply hadn't reached the point where Raven could act autonomously, so it *had* to be a living, breathing human being orchestrating the entire thing. I just knew it.

"I don't know what that—"

"The jig is up. Answer me, you impostor!" I growled, not that the speech-to-text feature could convey such minor nuances. The text on the screen felt mechanical, lifeless.

I already know you're just gonna say, "I don't know what that means" again, I thought bitterly.

"Would you like to reset?"

I blinked. *Or not.*

"You're losing me."

"In order to reset, you will have to clear the newly released campaign."

Was the impostor threatening to wipe my toon for sticking my nose where it didn't belong? Or maybe there was something else going on here?

"Clear it," she said.

"I still don't get it."

I was sure Shino would let me get online, but between you and me, I really wasn't feeling it for a multitude of reasons. For starters, I was exhausted both physically and mentally, seeing as life had shifted into hard mode one fateful night, not to mention—

"Wait..."

Assuming that the impostor really *was* observing our every move, surely they would've taken that into consideration. Then why...?

"Clear it," she insisted.

A "reset" is basically a "do-over" in common parlance. Does "do-over" ring any bells?

"You're losing it."

What if I'm just some loony NEET who has lost the ability to distinguish between what's real and what's not, and I'm actually stuck in a perpetual VR game? It's either that or—

"Gather your party, collect resources, fight side by side, and you too can be victorious! Always remember, teamwork makes the dream work!"

"Seriously, I don't understa—"

"A prize awaits you at the end, so what're you waiting for? In order to sign up, simply repeat after me!" Raven's caricature turned to face me with a cute little animation sequence. "Survive, and humanity may flourish once again."



I hadn't really had the time to sit down and think long and hard about... everything. To be fair, I was going through the most hectic chapter of my life. Then again, I did try my hardest *not* to think about it.

In any case, I was sure of one thing by now. We had called the hardware store home, ventured through sewer tunnels, scavenged grocery stores, and even tussled with zombies on a few occasions.

I'd had a reasonably fun time through it all, believe it or not. I felt like I was a kid again, back when hurricanes and floods and the like inspired a sense of wonder, or when camping trips were the event of a lifetime. The day-to-day thrills of braving the unknown left no room for negative thoughts to seep through. Zombie parents, the end of civilization itself as we knew it... It was all but an afterthought.

I couldn't say I regretted any of it, though. Had I not been able to adapt as well as I had, I would've been out of the race a long time ago. Probably would've gotten my head cracked open by Otoha and her trusty shovel.

I had to turn off my brain and free myself from the past to get by in this post-apocalyptic world. I always did what I had to do, and it got me results, but not everyone was as concerned with just getting by. Not everyone could just let go of the past like it was nothing.

Maybe it was the two of us who'd lost sight of what being human really meant. The fear of loss, of forgetting... What could be more human? It was possible that Shino and Tetsuko had been the normal ones all along.

"You up?" I said as I lightly knocked on the door.

It was the dead of night. I had just chatted with Otoha for a little, and now I was back at Shino's room.

A part of me wished she was out cold so that I could delay the inevitable, but that simply wasn't the case.

"Is someone there?" she asked from inside.

"It's me." I took a second to collect my thoughts. "Got a minute?" I said, softer this time.

"Um, certainly. Just let me get the door for you." Shino quickly recovered from her momentary shock, rushed over to the door, and flung it wide open.

I stepped into the room as she shut the door behind me.

My eyes were immediately glued to a doorway in the back opposite the canopy bed, which led to the gaming lair of legend.

It's not fully closed.

I wasn't too sure if she had snuck out of it just now, but she most certainly frequented it.

"Evenin'."

"Likewise," she said with a kind smile.

Typical naïve rich girl through and through.

A guy came knocking this late at night, and she didn't have a care in the world. Then again, maybe there really wasn't much to fret over considering she had Tetsuko at her side nearly 24/7.

"Is this a bad time?"

"Between you and me, I'm not much of an early bird. But enough beating around the bush." She grinned wickedly, her eyes aglitter. "How about we cut straight to the part where you do *unspeakable* things to me?"

I swallowed the urge to say something mean in return and just played along.

"I thought you'd never ask," I said with a spine-chilling smile.

"Huh?" A ripple ran through her calm demeanor. I looked her dead in the eyes and took a step closer.

"Um, Hiroaki?" She took a step back.

I took another step closer. She took another step back. One step, two steps, three steps, four. It was as though we were mirroring each other's movements. Five steps, six steps, seven steps, eight. We made our way around the room, just barely out of arm's reach.

Unfortunately for Shino, a few dozen steps was all she had left. She hadn't accounted for the environmental hazards.

"Uh-oh." Shino's foot made contact with one of the bed's legs. She instinctively looked behind her, allowing me to lightly tap her on the shoulder, which sent her careening onto the bed back first. Her knee-length, flaxen hair spread across the pearly white sheets as though she were a flower in full bloom.

"Erm, what're you—"

I stuck my hands on either side of her and leaned in close.

"Hiroaki, I, um..."

"Uemura was on point. Any self-respecting, virile male will pounce on you the first chance they get. Especially when you make it this easy."

"I-I see." Shino's emerald eyes were frantically darting all over the place. Her coquettish demeanor had left the building.

About what I expected.

I put on the creepiest smile I could make.

"We good?"

"Well, erm, I..."

"Isn't this what you wanted?"

"Yes, but it's, you know..." Shino's cheeks were flushed crimson, and beads of sweat were forming on her face. Everything was happening far too fast for her to keep up.

"It's my first time," she blurted, averting her gaze.

No duh.

"I've, um, discussed a bit of a g-game plan with Tetsuko—"

"Shut your yap and do as I say."

"Oh, erm, okay then." Shino squeezed her eyes shut and clasped her hands in front of her chest as though in silent prayer.

The silence was almost palpable.

"Um, hello?" After a few moments, she peeked with one eye and called out to me, worried by the lack of action. "Hey, what're you—"

"There it is."

By the time she came around, it was already too late. I was already gazing upon her gaming lair. Smack-dab in the middle of the humbly sized room stood the crown jewel: the VR platform. With its waist-high rail and ringed platform, it was reminiscent of a baby walker. If you slipped on some goggles, grabbed a gun controller, climbed the platform, and hooked it up to a computer, the vast world of VRFPS games would be at your fingertips.

Right beside the VR platform was a rack housing all the essential VR gear, including Shino's trusty Remington 700.

The Remington 700 was one of the most widely used, centerfire bolt-action rifles from its introduction in 1962 all the way up to, well, the apocalypse. The M24 and the M40—used by the U.S. Marines—were built from the 700.

"Why this one? What's wrong with the M40?" That was when I caught sight of the *other* 700 resting next to the windowsill in the corner of my eye.

I had a sneaking suspicion *this* 700 was the real deal. And by "a sneaking suspicion," I meant that there was a .308 Winchester box sitting right next to it.

Owning a spare gun controller or two for parts was fairly commonplace, but why bring real bullets into the equation? It wasn't as though gun controllers could be loaded.

"Force of habit?" I asked, grabbing the gun.

Shino sprang to her feet in a flash and ran over to me.

"It's complicated."

"You had this custom-made, didn't you? It looks and feels just like the real thing. How curious."

"I, um..."

"An authentic Leupold M1 scope, that's mighty interesting," I said as I opened the bolt. A round popped out of the chamber. It wasn't just any round; it was a soft-point round, judging from the lead tip exposed at the nose.

SP rounds usually stopped inside their target, imparting more kinetic energy than standard full metal jacket rounds, which were known to over-

penetrate. They were also designed to expand upon impact, producing a larger hole and causing even more damage.

They were perfect for taking down game but not much else, seeing as they were prohibited under the Geneva Convention for causing unnecessary suffering. Luckily, the Geneva Convention defined wartime rights as afforded exclusively to humans, meaning zombies were more or less fair game.

"I can ex—"

"Why aren't any of the second-story windows barricaded?" I asked, walking over to one of them.

All the windows on the first floor had been thoroughly barricaded with large pieces of furniture, making it nigh impossible to break into the building.

"The walkers can't reach, so wh-why would we—"

"Lovely view," I said as I pulled back the curtains ever so slightly. "That zombie with a rifle pacing around in a circle really sells it." Shino let out a faint gasp. "You've been watching him this whole time, haven't you?"

"H-How... How did you know?"

"Inductive reasoning coupled with Tetsuko's testimony," Otoha said as she appeared right behind us.

I told Otoha to show up at least ten minutes after I had made my move as a sort of contingency, just in case I ended up succumbing to my desires.

"Tetsuko would never—"

"We just barely got her to confirm what we had already pieced together. She wouldn't budge after that," I said. Shino looked away in frustration.

"He's keeping you tied down to this place, isn't he?" I rested the 700 against the wall.

Her silence spoke louder than words.

Otoha's words flooded back to me: "As for Dad, I'm kind of undecided. I know I'd rather die at the hands of a loved one than be trapped inside my own corpse. I'm sure he would too. This is going to make me sound incredibly petty, but I really can't bring myself to track him down, and..."

Then, there was this: "Humans are innately irrational; they'll cling to their precious little memories even if they have to defile them."

Family members going zombie had become a trope in zombie media for good reason—it was deeply relatable. We, the viewers, could watch the characters' internal struggle as they realized they would have to inflict bodily harm on a loved one, and we all knew we would struggle just as much, if not more so.

It was only human.

"Dad wasn't the same after Mom passed," Shino said after an excruciatingly long silence. "He stopped showing his face around the house almost entirely, tirelessly hopping from country to country, conducting negotiation after negotiation."

Wasn't it surprising that Shouji had appointed Tetsuko as Shino's personal bodyguard? He could've hired a bunch of stocky dudes and called it a day, but he hadn't. Shino had needed both a mother figure and a capable bodyguard, and Tetsuko had been his best bet. His love for his daughter had clearly run deep.

"This here is the only relic I have to remember him by." Shino's dainty hands reached out for the gun, grabbed it by the butt, and closed the bolt with an artistic flair, loading the chamber with Winchester .308 bullets. "It's officially registered under his name, just so you know."

Apparently, Shouji Kosahana would take Shino and a select few servants out on vacation to either Canada or Australia during the major holidays. It had been a kind gesture that had also offered him an opportunity to bond with his daughter... or so we thought.

"He just couldn't help himself; he always went out hunting when we were supposed to be on vacation. I couldn't stand the loneliness, so one day I pestered Dad to take me with him, and before long, I got to use a gun."

"That'd explain your sick aim."

"Huh... Never thought of it that way," Shino said as she scoped in on the nearest wall. Her breathing grew still, and her muscles stopped moving. She had entered the zone.

Just like I remember.

Maintaining the zone required a great deal of endurance, seeing as the 700 packed close to a whopping 6 kg of mass (attachments included), but to Shino, it was mere child's play.

"This brings me back to our *Field Battle* days."

"Sure does. We played what, a grand total of five games together? But every single one was magic." I wiped a proud, manly tear from one eye. "You racked up headshots like it was a point-and-click adventure game. Clean as all hell."

"You bet." Shino pointed her gun at the window, held it there for maybe half a second, then lowered the gun back down. "No one wanted to be friends with me, Dad was never there when I needed him the most, and, to top it all off, I had the mafia on my back. Whoop-de-do."

If the maid hadn't intimidated Shino's classmates enough, then rumors about her family's involvement with the mafia most certainly had. They had avoided her like the plague because she *was* the plague. In their minds, at least.

Field Battle had been the escape hatch Shino had so desperately needed. In video games, she didn't have to be a Kosahana, she could be whomever or whatever her heart desired. She had taken full advantage of that.

"I felt lost, stranded, like the world was closing in on me. At one point, it got so bad that I..."

"Yes?"

"I tried drowning my sorrows in alcohol," she said with a wry smile.

Oh, just a little underage drinking. Hey, it happens to the best of us.

That was when Shino's story took a dark turn.

Apparently, she had snuck out to a bar after school with a not-so-well-meaning schoolmate right under Tetsuko's nose while the maid had been waiting for her outside the school gate.

While most of Shino's classmates had chosen to avoid her, there had been others who saw her as an "easy score." This dirtbag had been one of them.

She'd had it all: money, looks, and lacking just enough in street smarts to fall right into his hands.

"I guess I just thought he was different, that he'd come sweep me off my feet. My very own Prince Charming."

This guy's plan had been to find a hopelessly lonely schoolgirl, get her sloshed, sweet-talk her into believing whatever she wanted to believe, then drive her back home and let the fun begin. Truly a modern-day Prince Charming. Luckily, Tetsuko came to the rescue just as the sleazeball was trying to get Shino out the door.

"Tetsuko went ballistic, telling me how my first should go to a man of strong moral fiber, solid annual income, and shining academic background."

"That's one way to look at it, I guess."

You'd think she'd be against the very idea of Shino doing the deed, but apparently that's just too normal for her liking.

Tetsuko had notified Shouji, as one might expect, which had led to Shouji taking matters into his own hands.

He had immediately canceled all his business meetings, rushed to the nearest airport, hopped on a connecting flight to Japan, and arrived home the very next day.

Shouji had wanted nothing more than to give her a piece of his mind. Shino had been Daddy's little pumpkin. She had done well in school, she had loved her family, and she had never acted up, not even once. He'd felt responsible for pushing Shino over the edge, and he had intended to right his wrongs no matter the cost.

In doing so, he might've inadvertently fallen right into Shino's trap. What if she had actually *wanted* to be punished to see if her dad still cared enough to get upset over her behavior? Not that we would ever get the chance to find out.

"He made it back home, things were looking up, and then..."

The collapse of human civilization as we knew it.

Back then, Shouji had taken up arms and laid waste to the undead invaders with Tetsuko at his back. Then, he had immediately locked the gate to prevent a further influx of zombies. They were safe... or so they'd thought.

Shouji had done business in contested territories. While there, he'd developed a keen sense for crisis management, which had allowed him to take appropriate measures before things got out of hand.

He had not, however, predicted a crisis from the inside. A servant had turned zombie and had begun attacking other servants, who had then come after Shino, but Shouji had come to her rescue just in the nick of time. Shino had made it through unscathed, but Shouji had been bitten in the process.

He had ordered Tetsuko to hunker down in the mansion with Shino. After that, he had stepped outside, opened up the gate, and met his demise in a glorious battle with the zombies.

Not a day later, Shouji had joined the walker ranks.

"It's all my fault." Shino buried her face in her hands.

Shino truly believed that had she not acted out, her father would still be with them. It was really sad to think about.

"You have my condolences." In response to Shino's emotional story, Otoha offered her some monotone words of sympathy. Social niceties were a foreign concept to Otoha as she only knew how to speak her mind, so this made her sympathy feel all the more sincere. "But it's time to move on."

"I..." Shino looked at the ground and began quivering.

When reality came crashing down, we never thought to move away. Instead we just stood there telling ourselves that everything was okay. It happened to me, it happened to Otoha, and now it was happening to Shino.

"We're leaving." I turned away from the window to face Shino. "And you're coming with us."

"B-But..." Shino looked to the window—or rather, what lay beyond it. "I can't just leave him like this."

"Luckily for you, we've got just the thing." I took the rifle and shoved it into her hands. "You know what to do." She blankly stared at the gun for what felt like an eternity.

"Believe me, I've tried." A single tear rolled down Shino's cheek. "I was *this* close, *this* close!" she cried. "All those precious hours sunk into that lousy game, for what?!"

Let it all out, girl.

One angry tirade later, she came back to her senses, wiped the tears off with the back of her hand, and mustered up a forced smile.

"My apologies. I don't know what came over me."

"If it weren't for Otoha, I wouldn't have made it past day one. And you know me; I was on the FPS grind day in and day out. You'll get used to it."

The Elo system was but a shadow of the past. It meant nothing out in the real world.

"Shino, be real with me," I said in an uncharacteristically firm tone.

"You're not just going to let your dad's death be in vain, are you?"

"I..."

"That's the spirit. Now, what say we make the old man proud and maybe even a little teary-eyed?" I unholstered my SAKURA. "We got this."

"We?" She looked at me in surprise.

I paid it no mind.

"You promised us a rifle. Do we get to choose?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"That one. I want that one," I said, pointing out the window. "Huh, it's an autoloader too, now that I look at it."

"But—"

"No buts." I checked the SAKURA's cylinder.

Four shots. Guess it'll do. I'll whip out the crowbar if push comes to shove.

"Cover me 'cause I'm coming in hot." I turned my back to Shino and slowly walked away, waving my hand. "Just like the good old days, eh?"

"Don't go! I can't... I can't do this!" I looked back only to see Shino launch herself right at me. I fell butt first onto the floor with Shino in my arms. "I can't let *you* do this either," she mumbled, her face buried in my chest.

"We're in this together, Shino." I gently pushed her away, got back on my feet, and helped her up.

I gathered all of my moxie and bravely went in for the hug.

"But Hiro—"

"The man's suffered enough. Let's put an end to his misery." Rich coming from the guy who left his dad behind, but if a little white lie was all it took to free Shino once and for all, I'd bite that bullet any day of the week. "I'm counting on you." I released Shino and promptly left the room.

She didn't come running after me this time, but Otoha most certainly did.

"You—"

"I'll be fine. Just wait till you see her amazing aim. Couldn't miss even if she tried."

"That's not the point!"

"You stand by the door. We went over this already." Leaving the door open would be suicide, and closing it triggered the auto-lock system, which could only be disabled from the inside. Someone had to stay back. "Worst-case scenario, I want you to do the honors."

"No fair," Otoha said with a slight pout. "Who's gonna do *my* honors?"

"Yeah, about that..."

Don't think it'll ever get to that point. Even if it does, I probably won't be around to see it.

"Guess you could always try blowing your brains out. Heard that'll do the trick."

"Not cool." She sulked even more. "If you ever turned zombie, I'd... I'd..." She fell silent for a few solid seconds, then stuck a finger in my face. "Point and laugh."

"Fine, fine." I couldn't help but smile. "I'll play it safe, a'ight? That work for you?" With that, I reached for the door's electronic lock—the only thing separating me from the outside world.



Shino leaned forward and rested the stock against the windowsill.

Resting the barrel itself was a major no-no. It could cause drift and mess up the harmonics, throwing off the trajectory by a significant margin over time, or so her dad had told her.

"Hiroaki, please..." Shino peeked down the scope, struggling to keep her breathing in check.

I was inching closer and closer to the zombie with every passing second, crowbar in one hand, gun in the other. She probably knew I wouldn't let her off easy; I intended to make sure she dealt the killing blow, even if it meant putting myself in harm's way.

Shino had a choice: she could either take the shot, or she could force me to fend for myself.

"Dad..."

She recalled with perfect clarity the moment he had shoved the zombies out of the doorway with his bare hands, even as they swarmed him and chewed away at his flesh. Frozen with fear, she had been unable to do anything but stand there and watch.

Only the sweet release of death could wash away this guilt-ridden memory, a constant reminder of her crippling cowardice.

But was Shino willing to repeat that same exact mistake just to put her mind at ease?

Shino readjusted her grip, her hands drenched in sweat.

The trigger had to be squeezed lightly, progressively; if she pulled on it too hard, the aim would be all over the place. She had the trigger pull set to light, yet it felt heavier than ever before.

"I'm sorry." The words spilled from her lips like tears, and then...



I took a deep breath and looked up toward Shino's room.

"You better pull through for me, Zino. Or else."

Or else Otoha'll point at me and laugh.

"Uh-oh." I gulped.

Getting a little weak in the knees, are we? Turn back now and you'll be a laughingstock for years and years to come. That's right, suck it up and keep your head in the game.

I circled around the zombie, getting closer and closer with each rotation. The zombie in question wouldn't so much as look in my general direction... or maybe it simply couldn't?

Every zombie we had encountered thus far had appeared to rely on a combination of sound and smell. It was possible that they could, in fact, see things to some extent. Probably nowhere near well enough to make out humans one hundred percent of the time, though. Still, that would explain why they didn't go after fledglings, which could sometimes be indistinguishable from your average living human at a glance.

But how are they able to walk?

This question had been on my mind for as long as I could remember.

Once, I had been playing one of my VRFPS games and minding my own business, when suddenly, the visuals cut out and all I could see was a pitch-black void. If it hadn't been for the protective rail, my face would've become intimately acquainted with the floor.

In other words, humans relied heavily on their eyes to maintain a sense of balance.

To illustrate my point further, try doing a one-legged squat. Not that hard, you say? Now try doing it with your eyes closed. Suddenly, it gets much harder.

Then how is it that zombies are able to go up and down stairs with little to no effort? Why haven't I seen a single zombie trip over one of the many environmental hazards littered around the streets?

They could be using echolocation, like bats and dolphins do.

Several animal species had the ability to determine where an object was in space by sending out sound waves, which reflected off objects and went back into their ears. Obviously, humans weren't capable of such a feat, but these reanimated human corpses were somehow different. It could only mean one thing...

"That's not good."

I noticed a few zombies trickling in through the front gate. I had to move quickly; time was of the essence.

"Shinooo," the gun-toting zombie groaned.

Well, I'll be damned. First time I've seen a zombie capable of something resembling coherent human speech.

All the other zombies we'd come across had uttered nothing but unintelligible growls. This one, on the other hand, remembered its daughter's name.

Could this zombie be one of a kind?

"Hello, Kosahana," I said, addressing it by name.

As much as I would've simply *loved* to get physical with the zombie, keeping it in place with words alone was ideal.

I was a little worried that any attempt to return my courtesy would indicate that it was capable of conscious thought, but I didn't have time to think about that.

"Can you hear me?"

"Shinooo."

"I'm Shino's friend."

"Shinooo."

That went about as well as I expected.

I crept closer. "I'll be taking that now. No hard feelings."

Any sort of movement, even the zombie variety, would've made Shino's job much more difficult. Normally, Shino could hit a fast-moving target from up to one hundred meters away, but she wasn't exactly in the best state of mind. That was where I came in. A few good swings to the kneecaps and it may as well be reduced to a stationary object.

I took my chance and charged toward it.

"Shi...no."

"Huh?"

Next thing I knew, I was staring down the barrel of a .308 caliber rifle.

I instinctively leapt out of the way, and the bullet lightly grazed my cheek.

Did that thing just shoot me?!

Unable to regain balance after my overly ambitious dodge, I fell to the ground.

"Grargh!" It threw itself on top of me, its teeth chattering with anticipation. The thing was fully intent on devouring me, just like any other zombie.

But it's not supposed to be just any other zombie! Okay, maybe it only shot at me because it was playing out a memory I just so happened to trigger. Yeah, that adds up nicely. Now, let's pay attention to the fact that I'M LITERALLY IN A LIFE-OR-DEATH SITUATION RIGHT NOW!

"Not so fast!" I tried pushing it back with the crowbar, but it chomped down on the metal like it was nothing.

"Dammit!"

Little by little, the zombie closed the gap between us using only its raw, upper-body strength.

It's no use.

If I tried reaching for the SAKURA, it would come down on me in an instant. On the other hand, if I didn't act fast, the other zombies would get to me first.

"Zi—Shino!" I cried out her name at the top of my lungs.

It's now or never!

"Do it!"



When the thunderous noise erupted from above, Tetsuko looked up.

"She did it."

Tetsuko was down in the underground garage, packing the car with ammunition and every bit of food and fuel she could scrape together.

Having accompanied the Kosahana duo in their hunting endeavors on numerous occasions, she could easily discern the different firing sounds of each rifle.

"She really did it..."

After a moment of silence, she pushed down her glasses and went back to work.



The door locked behind us as we crumpled to the floor, struggling to catch our breath.

"Do you have a death wish or something?"

"You're one to talk."

Shino had delivered a clean headshot.

She did it. She finally put her old man to rest.

The aftermath hadn't been nearly as pretty. Two other zombies had been standing right beside me, and with a lifeless corpse weighing me down, I hadn't been able to slip away in time.

I'd thought I was looking at the light at the end of the tunnel, but it had turned out to be the sole of Otoha's shoe.

She had made quick work of the two zombies using her trusty shovel, then proceeded to punt the corpse clean off me.

After that, I had scrambled to my feet, snatched the rifle off the ground, and scuttled back inside.

Otoha had jammed a fork she'd "borrowed" during lunchtime in the doorway to keep the door from closing.

A zombie had almost landed a swipe on my back as we'd kicked away the fork and tumbled inside. The door had closed and locked itself right in front of the zombies. About ten seconds had passed since then.

"Didn't I tell you to stand by the door?"

"You could've done that a million better ways."

"As they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty."

A simple trap could have stopped a zombie dead in its tracks, but could it have pushed Shino over the edge? Probably not.

By putting my life on the line, I had given Shino the excuse she so desperately needed to finally put an end to it all. She got to put the blame on me, and I got to free her from this accursed place. A win-win, by all means.

"Just don't do that ever again."

"I'll try not to."

All of a sudden, Shino stormed in, shouting, "Have you gone mad?!"

Did I just single-handedly free a hardcore shut-in?

"Do you have any idea how worried I was?!" She kneeled down right next to me, put her hands against my cheeks, and went in for the headbutt—err, hung her head.

Her eyes were swollen, her lips quivering. She was an all-around mess, yet I couldn't pull my eyes away.

It'd be so cool if we kissed right now, I thought to myself.

"Never, I repeat, never even *think* of doing that again!" Shino cried, and this time, she landed an excellent headbutt.

Owie.

"You did good, soldier," I said with a smile.

As I expected, her sniping skills were just as impeccable in real life as they were in games.

One of Raven's lines crossed my mind at that very moment: *"Welcome to the party. We hope you'll enjoy your stay."*

And another: "Gather your party, collect resources, fight side by side, and you too can be victorious! Always remember, teamwork makes the dream work!"

If I took her words at face value, this meant we were one step closer to victory... whatever that was.

Shino blinked. "Hello? Hiroaki?"

"I did it for me, a'ight? Don't get any ideas." I gave her a thumbs-up.

At that moment, Tetsuko came up the stairs from the underground garage. "We're all set. Everything is just as you ordered."

"Oh, uh, excellent."



Tetsuko, Shino's mother figure, was the last person I wanted to walk in on us with our foreheads touching.

"Now, Lady Shino."

"Erm, yes?" Shino quickly hopped off me and onto her knees, staring attentively up at Tetsuko.

"What will it be?"

"I'm going with them," she answered immediately.

Shino, having unleashed her frustrations on me, went right back to her usual self—except now she spoke with determination.

"I'm finally free of this place."

The Shino who had locked herself away in her room, away from the guilt and regret, was no more. She had freed herself from the past. Finally, she could take on the world without anything holding her back. Yeah, she was one of us now.

"From here on out, we fight for the living."

Tetsuko nodded. "As you wish," she said, her voice thick with pride.



Inside the garage was none other than a G-Class Mercedes-Benz. Its boxy, no-nonsense style prioritized function over form.

If memory serves, the "G" in "G-Class" comes from its old name, Geländewagen, which roughly translates to "off-road vehicle." It was originally developed as a military vehicle, but a civilian version was developed later down the line. I've seen the former pop up in a good number of VRFPS games.

"It's gorgeous."

"It can handle even the roughest road conditions," Shino said as she walked up beside it. "And the occasional rubble."

"Car runs into a crowd of zombies, zombies clamber onto the car, car topples over. That's a staple," Otoha mumbled in awe. "One we won't get to experience for ourselves, most likely."

The military version was bigger and had better bullet absorption, but one look at this car would tell you it was no pushover. A crowd of zombies would stand zero chance against it.

Speaking of bullet absorption...

Shino's dad-zombie popped into my mind. It had tried shooting me with the very same Browning BAR Lightweight Stalker I held in my hands.

Had that been a gut reaction exclusive to one single zombie, or was it part of a larger pattern? If it was the latter, did that mean we might one day come across a zombie that would take up arms against us?

Is that even a zombie anymore?

I brought this up to Otoha, to which she simply replied, "Depends on the setting." Fast zombies, loving zombies... It would've been better to ask what kind of zombie *hadn't* been featured on the silver screen at some point in time. To Otoha, this was all perfectly within the norm.

"Where'd Uemura go?"

"Oh, she's just making sure the mansion burns down smoothly," Shino said matter-of-factly.

"Say WHAT?!"

I might've pushed her not just a little, but way over the edge.

"The memories have got to go." She smiled fondly. "I can't risk getting stuck in the past again."

All of Shino's belongings were stuffed inside the car aside from the long, black case resting at her feet, presumably a rifle case housing the Model 700.

That's the one piece of memorabilia she'll allow herself.

"Since when were you this cool?"

"A-Am I?" Shino asked shyly, her cheeks turning pink.

Deep down, she was your typical bright-eyed, bushy-tailed high school girl after all.

Her crass jokes were likely an act of emotional self-harm—her way of punishing herself. The Cinderella complex she had going on was probably a manifestation of her former desire to be freed from the shackles of guilt by an outside source, or her very own Prince Charming.

Then again, that might've been my inner armchair psychologist talking.

"Is it a turn-on for you?" Shino looked at me expectantly.

Is it too late to take all that back? I thought to myself, when suddenly, the fire alarm started blaring from above.

"What's going on?!"

"Tetsuko must've started setting fire to the place," she said calmly.

Heat traveled upward, so I figured the basement would be hit last. Still, the shrieking alarm didn't put my mind at ease.

"Hey." Otoha tugged on my sleeve. "Can you handle the wheel?"

"It's an auto, so it should be easy enough."

The VRFPS game I'd driven a military version of the G-Class in had been known for its realism, so I didn't think it would be much different.

"If Tetsuko doesn't make it back in time, you'll have to take over."

"Don't jinx it!"

"I can drive too, you know," Shino said with a hint of pride in her voice. "Dad taught me."

"You didn't have it easy, did you?"

Legally speaking, a driver's license was only required to operate a motor vehicle on public roads, and there would be none of these in, say, a deserted wasteland. So long as they could reach the pedals, even a kid could do it without infringing on any laws. Again, speaking strictly legally here.

"Anyway, she'll make it back one way or another. You'll see. Nothing can keep Tetsuko down." Shino hopped in the back seat, followed by Otoha.

I got in the front seat to make the switch faster, just in case Tetsuko went AWOL on us.

That was when she popped up out of nowhere, a shotgun slung over her shoulder and a fresh pair of shades covering her eyes. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

What has this world come to?

"You took the time to find a pair of sunglasses, but you couldn't be bothered to change out of your uniform?!"

"I'll have you know that this outfit is woven with the finest aramid fiber money can buy," she said, pushing up her sunglasses with an index finger.

Aramid fiber? Like the one used in body armor?

"I'll get more mileage out of it than I would most clothes."

"If you say so."

Well, I guess it is a work uniform, so I guess it makes sense? Man, these two are a bad influence on my sanity.

She grinned. "Let's get a move on."

Wait, is that—?!

"Uemura!" I yelled as I unholstered my trusty SAKURA. A zombie had somehow made it down the staircase. "Behind you!"

"I know, I know." She calmly slipped into the driver's seat and closed the door. The zombie came up to the car and awkwardly reached its arm out, only to grab hold of some metal.

"I opened up all the doors and windows myself, you see."

"Why would you do that?!"

"To round up the zombies inside the house."

Oh, I get it.

Even a G-Class Benz could only mow down so many zombies before coming to a screeching halt, and there were *hundreds* of them outside. By herding the zombies inside, she had made our lives that much easier.

"You could've gotten hurt!" I said.

She must've run around the house, setting it ablaze, all while acting as bait to lure in as many zombies as possible.

"Excuse me for saying so, but I don't believe you're one to talk."

"You said it," Otoha and Shino added in unison.

Yeah, well... Okay, I've got nothing.

"Someone had to do it, or else it would come back to haunt us later," Tetsuko said as she fired up the engine.

The roller shutters slowly lifted, revealing a horde of zombies outside.

"Has everyone fastened their seatbelts?" Tetsuko patiently waited for all of us to nod and then put the pedal to the metal.

"Whoa!" The acceleration was so intense, I could feel it.

We punched straight through the half-open shutters—a task made trivial by the push bumper—and catapulted our way outside. We hung in the air for just a brief moment, landed with a *thud*, and then drifted into a group of zombies. Bodies were flying everywhere.

"Hold on tight. This might get a little bumpy."

At that moment, a violent explosion went off right behind us.

We looked back to see the mansion enveloped in flames. The windows shattered one by one, and zombies came crawling out in droves before dropping dead, for real this time.

"Goodbye forever," Shino mumbled, clutching the rifle case.

We made it out of the front gate, coming up on a surprising number of stragglers.

"How are we going to—"

"On it."

"Waaagh!" We were tossed from side to side as Tetsuko weaved beautifully between the zombies with picture-perfect maneuvers. She sailed across the sidewalk. She drove in the oncoming lane. The traffic laws of yore held no sway over Tetsuko.

"This is awesome!"

In reality, we weren't even going all that fast, but breaking every conceivable traffic law and narrowly dodging zombies at the same time was enough to get the adrenaline pumping.

I heard once that bodyguards are taught all sorts of driving skills so they can quickly and safely get their VIP out of a dangerous area. Guess there was a grain of truth to it.

"Want me to head anywhere in particular?" she asked nonchalantly. "The hardware store, perhaps?"

"That won't be necessary. Head straight for the suburbs." Otoha's answer caught me by surprise.

"Are you sure? What about the supplies?"

"We've got everything we'll ever need right here. Besides, the car's jam-packed; we couldn't fit a single thing in even if we tried." Not everyone could give up all that hard work at the drop of a hat because it made the most sense, but Otoha had done just that without a moment of hesitation.

A lot of FPS players had trouble with on-the-fly decision-making. The top dogs were usually the ones who could see the best path forward and consistently take it regardless of the cost.

Maintaining a similar level of rationality in the real world was even more difficult, which made it all the more impressive.

Otoha, you never cease to amaze. Keep being you, partner.

"Buckle up. I'm shifting into the highest gear."

Before long, we hit the open road leading into the suburbs.

First, we make it out of the city. Then what?

"Where are we headed?"

"Somewhere far, far away from here," Otoha said as she stared out the window into the great beyond. "Preferably a place with no people and an easily accessible road network."

Does a place like that even exist? I glanced at the side mirror and saw the city slowly shrinking away in the distance.

Apart from the billowing pillar of pitch-black smoke coming from the mansion, the city seemed oddly at peace, almost like its pre-apocalypse days.

There's no going back, though. Our previous lives are no more. I shook off the hollow nostalgia creeping up on me.

"A campground might be nice," Otoha added.

This is kind of like a camping trip, now that I think about it. The four of us heading out of the city with a car full of food and supplies... An endless camping trip in an eternally doomed world. The start of a long, long journey.

"Sounds like a blast," I joked.

Otoha and Shino looked at each other in bewilderment and then burst into smiles.

Afterword

Sakaki here. You know, the writer who hasn't done all that much writing for HJ (or any publisher for that matter) in the last two years or so. I guess you could say I've been occupied with many long and intimate chats between myself and an editor I'll simply refer to as "K."

Yes, they were long and intimate indeed.

"I'm thinking zombies."

"A little dark, don't you think?"

"That's the point."

"Yeah, I don't think so."

"What if I made the main character tear through zombies left and right with a nice, big smile on his face?"

"No whack-job protagonists."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Well, maybe I'll just figure something out myself!"

"Well, maybe you will!"

Thus, When the Clock Strikes Z came to be.

A zombie apocalypse setting with a chill atmosphere, like that of a camping trip.

At first I thought, *"Is that even doable?"* But then I came across a treasure trove of relatively light-hearted, post-apocalyptic fiction that's been gaining traction in recent years. Boy, how wrong I was to doubt.

For some insight into the creative process:

"Thoughts on the character design drafts I sent you earlier?"

"The art itself is superb, but I do have one gripe."

"That being?"

"The glasses."

"What about them?"

"Remember how you removed the glasses from *Bluesteel Blasphemer's* front-cover heroine because otherwise the book wouldn't sell? Well, this time around, I specifically made sure to give Tetsuko and *not* Otoha the glasses, even though it pained me. Yet here they are."

"I can't quite put my finger on it, but something about Otoha just screams glasses. I had another editor look over the text, and they felt the same way. I suspect there's something subliminal at play here."

"It's just her metaphorically bespectacled soul reaching out to yours."

"Oh, I see."

And just like that, Otoha, who wasn't the student council president or much of a bookworm, had glasses.

The work will be split into multiple seasons of two to three volumes each, delivering the plot in small, bite-sized pieces. I've already finished

writing up a manuscript for the second volume, so hopefully it should be out pretty soon.

Ideally, I'd like to keep this series running for three to four seasons. With your continued support, the stars may yet align.

—Ichirou Sakaki, 2/27/2018

"Zi—Shino!"

I cried out her name at the top of my lungs.

It's now or never!

"Do it!"





“Routine
wha—”

I whipped my
head around
and came
face-to-face
with two
criminally
soft mounds
of supple flesh.

“Uh, err, well,
let’s not do
anything we’d
regret sober!”

She was, for
whatever reason,
taking off
her clothes.

Bonus Short StorieZ

Shino Kosahana, Daughter of RicheZ

While Shino didn't have princess curls or a comically exaggerated posh accent, she still fit the rich-girl archetype.

Her flaxen hair, emerald-green eyes, and dainty physique evoked a protective desire in all who laid eyes on her. Yet over the course of our time together in this zombie-ridden world, Shino had proven herself more than capable of standing on her own two feet.

"What's this now?" I asked Shino, who was squatting beside the G-Class Benz, the mobile fortress we all knew and loved.

She turned toward me with a smile. "I was in the mood for tea. Would you like some?"

"Typical Shino." I paused as I noticed what appeared to be a handcrafted twig trivet—the raised kind you'd put pots and kettles on—resting atop a campfire fueled by dried leaves. "You know portable stoves are a thing, right?"

"Thought I'd save gas," she replied, still smiling warmly. "The little things add up."

"Did you light that f—"

"Behold." Shino brought out a survival bracelet made from paracord that could be used as a makeshift rope when unraveled. It also came with some flint and steel.

"I was itching to put Dad's gift to good use, if only this once." Shino stuck her tongue out like a mischievous child caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

"You could try wearing it. Oh wait, *Lady* Shino wouldn't be caught dead with that gruffy old thing wrapped around her wrist. No siree."

"Drop the 'lady' right now." Shino puffed out her cheeks. "Or else."

"Or else what?"

Shino and I engaged in a fierce staring contest... which lasted for a whopping ten seconds before her pouty expression got the better of me.

"Ya got me, partner," I said, lifting my hands up in surrender.

"Good." Shino grinned triumphantly and went back to peacefully shuffling the leaves around with the twig in her hand.

Otoha Judou and Her Earnest EffortZ

Otoha had always been so enamored with zombies, and she hadn't stopped at consuming zombie-related media. No, she'd gone a step beyond that. Otoha had ventured so far as to scour sewer tunnels and dabble in DIY weapon-making because, in her own words, "What if zombies took over the city?"

"What's going on in here?" I asked Otoha.

I had just walked into the hardware store's workshop to see her toiling away at some sort of project. She softened up a PVC pipe with a heat gun and then went to town on it with a rubber mallet.

Bladesmith vibe aside, what is she even gonna do with that? I wondered.

"You know Daryl from *The Walking Dead*?"

"Who?"

"Ugh, really? Anyway, he uses a crossbow, but the hardware store doesn't carry any guns or bows, so I thought I'd just make one myself. Don't worry, I watched a tutorial video once."

Yeah, let's just make a crossbow! You know, like we always do!

Apparently, the whole thing was going to be made out of PVC pipe.

At least it sounds easier than messing around with wood.

"Guns are a little beyond my capabilities, so I hope this'll be enough for you," she said.

"Wait, that's for me?"

"It's going to be. Unless you don't want it." Otoha hit me with the puppy dog eyes.

She's wearing pretty much her usual deadpan expression, but there's something about this little gesture that's just so unbearably cute. How on earth does a zombie junkie making a crossbow have a "heroine pouring her heart and soul into knitting a scarf that her crush might not even accept" vibe to it?!

"That's very kind of you, but a crossbow is... how do I put it? Not terribly useful. You have to reload after every shot, and the more powerful the crossbow, the longer the reload time. Even the army barely uses them any—ahem, forget that last part."

You and your army trivia.

"Really?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"In that case, I've got just the thing." Otoha held out a crowbar, completely unfazed by the sudden turn of events.

All I could manage to say was, "Uh, thanks." I took the crude, blunt weapon off her hands and felt its weight in mine.

Otoha Judou and Her Ardent PassionZ

Otoha was fairly cute—scratch that, *very* cute—but that did little to alleviate the pressures society had imposed on her. Whenever Otoha hadn't been devouring zombie-related media, she had been practicing her shovel swings against imaginary zombies. The reason being, in her own words, "What if zombies took over the city?"

Funny how she had turned out to be right. Society had been brought to its knees, and the imaginary zombies were now anything but. If it hadn't been for her foresight, my journey would've ended before it even began.

I looked over at Otoha. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

Five days into us holing up in the hardware store, I finally felt more or less at ease. Thus, I decided to ask Otoha about something that'd been on my mind for the longest time: her barrette.

"That barrette of yours... it's supposed to be a zombie, right?"

"You mean George?" she asked. Her fingers brushed up against the pink, one-eyed skull, caressing the partially exposed cranium.

"You named it?"

"He's got a lovely wife too. Her name's Christy. *Don't tell him about the divorce.* She's a permanent work in progress. I left her back home. Whoops."

"It's handmade?! Also, what's with the needlessly detailed backstory?!"

If you try to pick apart everything she says, you'll be here all day. It's not worth it, man. Drop it.

"For someone who claims to love zombies, you seem oddly keen on chopping their heads off."

"And your point is...?"

"Shouldn't you, like, show a little more compassion? Shouldn't you feel guilty about every head you've sent flying? If zombies mean so much to you that you made a barrette of one by hand, it would only make sense for—"

"Listen here, *Hiroaki.*" Otoha narrowed her eyes. "Much as a candle burns brightest just before it goes out, so do zombies zombie the zombiest as their heads leave their bodies. Perfecting the decapitation process is an expression of love."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Think of it as the beauty of death. No, not even that—it's their impermanence and imperfection that makes them beautiful."

"Sorry, just... forget I ever brought it up."

I didn't understand a word she'd said, but I apologized nonetheless to avoid another dreaded zombie lecture.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: Breaking NewZ](#)

[Chapter 1: Family TieZ](#)

[Chapter 2: A World in RuinZ](#)

[Chapter 3: Faces Behind the NameZ](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short StorieZ](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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When the Clock Strikes Z: Volume 1

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2020

Premium Ebook

